

Sunday, July 29, 2012: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21

David stares at us out of a mirror and shows us our capacity for sinning.

by [Joshua Carney](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

About a year ago my wife bought a gadget that checks all of the Christmas lights on a string and alerts the user to the one that is burned out. I didn't pay much attention to it at first. Then one day, while I was checking lights one by one (like Clark Griswold in *Christmas Vacation*), she showed me how the gadget worked. It was wonderful!

Like my gadget, 2 Samuel 11:1-15 offers us the opportunity to understand the beauty of a solution. In the case of this text, with its story of King David, we must first understand the magnitude of human sin before we can appreciate the solution: a faithful love and just response of God to our sin.

In 1 Samuel 13, Samuel delivered crushing news to Saul: his reign was over because "the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart." But after he was made king, David, the man after God's own heart, failed to understand what was in his heart and was overcome by the seductive power of lust. Fifteen verses detail David's sins, which include voyeurism, coveting, adultery, a failed cover-up attempt and murder. In a moment that mimics Adam and Eve in the garden, another apple of God's eye has turned into a bad apple.

During a sermon that I've given several times, I show a painting that never fails to generate mixed emotions and conversation about sin and judgment. Lars Justinen depicts global political leaders from 2007, among them former U.S. President George W. Bush, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Osama bin Laden. At the bottom of the painting, Jesus is washing their feet.

While all of our leaders are guilty of sin, whether private or public, we love to hate bin Laden; we put him in a special category because his sins mark him as worse than most humans. Certain sins are forgivable, but bin Laden's pushed him beyond

the reach of the cross. Christian political leaders are never guilty of such heinous crimes—right? Wrong. Second Samuel tells the story of David, God’s chosen king, who falls hard and devastatingly fast from his pedestal. If we’re honest, we’ll admit that if David were a contemporary leader, we’d detest him and put his name right next to those of Eliot Spitzer, Jerry Sandusky and Bernie Madoff.

That’s because David stares at us out of a mirror and shows us our capacity for sinning. He is Jesus’ sermon realized. Lust in the heart ends in adultery. Anger and jealousy lead to murder. If we hear David’s story properly, its truth will not help us to judge others, but instead will leave us—each of us—waiting to be judged. What should God do with our darkest hours, our descents into sin?

Several years ago I was visiting my sister when we heard a tragic story on the news. A Texas mother had drowned her five children. My sister, who delivered five children in seven years, gasped in shock and outrage. But a few minutes later she said, with a sober expression, “I could understand how she got there.” My sister loves her five children, but she has a perspective that those without five children lack. She is always busy—scrubbing floors, doing laundry, doing potty training, changing diapers, making meals and postponing her own needs and wishes. She could understand how a woman might “get there.”

Our sins may seem pale in comparison with the Texas woman’s deed, but David’s story helps us realize that we too are riddled with sin. We listen as if we, not David, are being convicted. We can understand how he got there. And then—from that place—we can hear the good news. This week it comes in Paul’s words from the third chapter of Ephesians.

“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.”

We must keep in mind that love comes with justice. When I first preached my way through David’s story three years ago, I noticed that the lectionary leaves out a critical verse. In this week’s reading, Nathan comes to judge David, but the text is truncated. It’s as if a NASCAR driver hit the brakes right before the finish line.

It’s not until 2 Samuel 11:26–12:13, and especially 12:13b and 14b, that we hear the good, then the really bad news. David repents, and Nathan announces that God has taken away David’s sin. “Now the Lord has put away your sin: you shall not die.” But

what follows is bad news indeed: "The child that is born to you will die."

Despite the horror of the baby's death, the lesson here is not about God's punishment, but about the severity of our sin mixed with God's love. Preachers should tread carefully: preaching judgment is one thing, but naming particular calamities caused by sin is inappropriate. God condemns this in the book of Job, and in Luke 13:4 Jesus points out that misfortune does not necessarily correlate with sin.

We preach both God's justice and God's love, as well as sin's presence in their midst. David's story is both rich and tragic. It offers hope, but it also reminds us of the real pain that follows poor choices. Grace is not cheap. Justice will prevail.