

No Lie Lives Forever, Part 1: The Lie

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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. Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting; and he instructed the messenger, “When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, then, if the king’s anger rises and if he says to you, ‘Why did you go so near the city to fight? Why did you go so near the wall?’ then you shall say, ‘your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.’”

So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The messenger said to David, “The men gained an advantage over us and came out against us in the field, but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall. Some of the king’s servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.”

David said to the messenger, “thus you shall say to Joab, ‘Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Press your attack on the city and overthrow it.’ And encourage him.”

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When 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 was evil in God’s sight.

Literature does not contain a more perfectly told story than 2 Samuel 11 and 12. None contain a more perfect picture of the power of power to corrupt a good person. None is more dismissive of the personhood of women. Few have been as poorly preached.

King David as a king peaks in 2 Samuel 10. From there he falls and he falls and he falls. And Israel with him. Long after David died, after his sons and his grandsons died, Israel kept falling. Ever so slowly until her landing was like bouncing on a runway. In exile. In Babylon. Where she had neither king nor country to claim any more.

Chapter 11 is the tipping point, the fulcrum. When God’s most blessed human so far in the scriptures turns out to be as human as all the rest. All the same hurts and hates and hopes, as Brueggemann said. So much violence, deceit and death because the man to whom God had given more than God had given any man ever, would not be content with it. He had palaces, a harem of wives and concubines, armies and lands, the promise of God’s perpetual presence and blessing on him and his descendants. But for David, at this particular moment and place, it wasn’t enough.

He wasn’t even supposed to be home. He was supposed to be at work. Maybe he was sick, under the weather, or depressed, or exhausted. But not TOO sick. Not too sick for voyeurism.

Voyeurism. A word I do not recommend googling for the spelling. It is not becoming in a husband and it leads nowhere enriching. It is not edifying for anyone involved. If David told himself anything at all, it was probably “I’m not hurting anyone.”

Thus Martin Luther King Jr.’s often repeated phrase, “No lie lives forever.”

If it was David’s first lie of this story, it lived an unusually brief life, two years, maybe three. But I’m inclined to believe David didn’t justify himself at all. He didn’t have to. He was King. But rather, [I’m inclined to believe] that he saw something he wanted. So he took it.

He didn’t speak to her. He didn’t speak about her. He saw what he wanted. He took what he wanted. And then he was done. Probably went back downstairs for supper with his kids and his wives.

I don’t know what the margins of your Bibles say, but mine says, “David commits adultery with Bathsheba.”

Mark that out. This isn’t a story about adultery. This is a story about a rape. The literary version of a story which happens day in, day out, around the world, without words or bruises or police reports.

Five-minute stories. Five minutes from which one person walks away ready for the next part of his day, and the other walks, stumbles, crawls away, shattered and ashamed. As likely to protect him as report him.

Blech! It’s ugly, and then gets uglier. He made her pregnant and tried to trick her husband into going home for a night or two. When he wouldn’t, King David killed him so people would believe Uriah WAS the daddy after all. Lying every step of the way. The kinds of lies only kings can tell and get away with. The kinds of lies that get many people killed, then get death dismissed like yesterday’s news.

“These things happen”, David told Joab, “Nothing to worry about really.” Believing he’d covered his tracks well enough. Believing that his lie would live forever.

Brueggemann describes the story as one of invitation, seduction and destruction. Not David toward Bathsheba, wife-of-Uriah-the-Hittite. (Notice she never once is called by her own name but by the one of whom she belongs.

He neither invites nor seduces. He demands and he takes. In the process many are destroyed.

Rather, David himself is invited and seduced and ultimately, beyond the boundaries of our two-week story, likewise broken-hearted when these same sins, rape and murder, bloom in the lives of his own sons.

Maybe innocently enough, David is sitting on his roof and sees his neighbor come out to bath. The Lord invites him to go back downstairs to family. Something else invited him to stay, seduced him to stay. No doubt gave him a detailed reason why staying was no problem, that

he in fact deserved to stay. He was the king after all. And it would be so easy to pin David to the wall here and point and judge and blame. But the story is hardly profound. It's the oldest, most common story of all. One person sees and takes something she wants, because she can, without consequence or retribution.

I've done nothing a tenth as terrible as David. I have far less than a 10th of the power he had. Nobody does what I say, unless I have a treat in my hand. Even fewer are afraid of me. But that is not to say I don't use treats. That I don't use what influence I do have to get what I want, when and where I can.

I've no intention of letting David off the hook here. He raped a woman and then added her to his harem making himself out the hero, thinking no one was the wiser. But see, powerful as people are, some things aren't in our control.

But David has two very big problems. First, Bathsheba-wife-of-Uriah-the-Hittite got pregnant. Second, Uriah-the-Hittite will not visit his wife when his men at the front cannot visit theirs. Not even when David gets hammered will Uriah the Hittite waver from his own moral center.

The Hittite is the honorable one and the king is a disgrace. As am I, and everyone else who claims that "God has blessed us with so much," but then turns around to use that blessing, that power, for our own personal satisfaction at someone else's expense. David, King David, God's own chosen one -- and a liar, a rapist and a murderer. It's all true. None cancels out the rest. It is the scandal of our faith.

Our minds, our hearts, want us to choose. The discomfort nudges us to call it adultery, which is also bad, but so much less sickening. If we can disperse the blame even a little, the truth isn't quite so exposing. But it's all true. And it's light. Our eyes cannot keep from seeing the truth in our own history, in our midst and in our hearts. The lies we abide every day. The lies we tell and continue to tell. The choices we make and the choices we make to cover the choices we've already made.

Choosing and choosing and choosing ourselves into deeper and deeper trouble, all the while fooling ourselves into believing that one more little lie, one more little maneuver is all it will take.

King David makes me sick. For what he did, for what he appeared to get away with doing, for what he demonstrates so clearly and simply about human corruptibility. But also, for how in him I recognize the punishment far worse than death. Read on, friends, and see one of his sons rape one of his daughters. See that son murdered by another son who in turn is murdered by David's own officers. See every inch of ground David gained, lost by his descendants.

See 1,000 years go by and in the genealogy of Jesus, see Bathsheba listed as Bathsheba-wife-of-Uriah-the-Hittite, still property but not David's. Stolen from the only righteous man in the story and he wasn't even Jewish.

Some live decades and some live centuries, but no lie lives forever. And yet how easily faith and folly live together in the human heart. Our capacity to take what we want because we can, pretending we can leave the consequences on the shelf and walk away.

My high school friend, Becky, was so excited to find sugar-free candy at Hook's Drugstore she ate the whole bag in one sitting. Then had diarrhea for two days and learned that "no calories" does not equal "no consequences."

For all David's power, some things were not subject to him. The biology of Bathsheba-wife-of-Uriah-the-Hittite and Uriah-the-Hittite's code of honor. And a man named Nathan, David's spiritual counselor who comes along in chapter 12 bearing the hard, hard word that no lie lives forever.

If the text ended on a happier note, we could too. And we will. We will see God stay with David as he falls and falls and falls.