

David had already done some pretty terrible things
by the time we get to this story.

We don't hear about it much,
not in church,
and certainly not on Sunday morning.

The kinds of things that David did
don't really make for good Sunday morning conversation.
Seems like he belongs more to Saturday night.

By now we all know the basic outline of David's story.
Least of his brothers,
chosen to be king,
kills a giant,
becomes the king,
and Israel lived happily ever after.

But it just didn't happen that way.
It didn't happen nearly that way.

David was the least of his brothers,
and the most unlikely choice to be king.
He did kill Goliath
to rout the Philistines off the field,
and he did become the king,

but in between all that is the story of a man,
and not even a very good man.

When David offered to do battle with the Philistine giant,
he went forward bravely to King Saul and said,
“I will go and face this man,
but what will I receive in return?”

‘What’s in it for me?’

These are the first words out of David’s mouth in all of scripture.

It is not the beginning we dream of for our heroes.
But it is David’s beginning.

And so he moves on.

David wins his battle
and becomes an aid to the king.

King Saul’s madness eventually drives David into hiding.
And while in exile,
David makes his life however he can.

He becomes a mercenary,
fighting alongside the hated Philistines.
And when his band would inevitably do battle with an Israelite town,
David would order the destruction of every living thing,
so that no one could take back word
that David was fighting alongside the enemy.

But remember,
this is the story of a man.
Not a very good man,
but not a villain either.

David is also capable of great generosity.

After Saul's madness finally plays itself out,
after David ascends to the throne
that had been promised him by Almighty God,
after all that,
David extends kindness to the family of Saul.

In this time it would have been customary
for David to seek out and destroy every member of Saul's household,
anyone who could claim to be an heir.

Instead,
David seeks Jonathan's son,
Saul's grandson,
and he gave him a place to live in his own house,
as David had once lived in Saul's house.

David is a complex character.
He is capable of great brutality,
of scheming,
and of unbelievable selfishness.

He is also a writer of beautiful poetry,
a gallant hero,
and a shrewd leader.

We sing his songs every week in church,
and we take comfort in his words at our funerals,
"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

There are pages written about him,
in scripture,
in commentary,
and in film and poetry.

The Leonard Cohen song, "Hallelujah"
is written about David praising God.

It's a song that has been covered again and again,
with my favorite being a version by Rufus Wainwright.

***I've heard there was a secret chord
that David played to please the Lord,
but you don't really care for music do you?
It goes like this: the 4th the 5th
the minor fall, the major lift;
the baffled king composing Hallelujah!***

Why?

Why do we talk about this man?

Why do we read about him in scripture?

With all that we can say about him,

 "he is not a villain,

 but neither is he a very good man",

why do we learn his story so well?

The Bible says that God looked at this complex man and said,

 "This is a man after my own heart.

 I will bless David's house forever.

 And one day,

 I will raise a Son of David

 to be Prince of Peace in all the earth."

A good friend wrote these words in a sermon about David,
explaining why we tell this story.

“We tell David’s story
not because he is better than us,
but because he is not.
He is worse than us.

He sinned much.
God forgave him much.

We tell David’s story
because the inner struggle
between the powerful king’s persona
and the good shepherd within
is the crucible where poetry is born.

In the struggle between power and responsibility,
between selfishness and justice,
beauty sometimes rises.

The dark side of David almost won out.”¹

In Leonard Cohen’s words:

***Your faith was strong but you needed proof.
You saw her bathing on the roof;
her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you.***

¹ Roger Ard. *Proper6C07StPet*. A sermon preached in 2007 at St. Peter’s in Rome, GA

The powerful king is walking the rooftops of his palace at night.
His army is away at war.

Far from the battle,
David sees a beautiful woman
bathing in her private garden.

He wanted her,
he had to have her.
And so he took her,

and then he sent her on her way.

And that would have been the end of it.

The story is not complicated by love
or even a reference to a divine plan.
There is only the bald desire of a man
corrupted by power
and blind to his own transgression.

And that would have been the end of it,
except that Bathsheba reports back to David,
“I am pregnant.”

And it is only now
that the horror
of David’s ruthless cunning come into full focus.

David plots to cover up the pregnancy,
first by encouraging Uriah,
the husband of Bathsheba,
to come home and sleep with his wife,
thereby creating the possibility
that the child is not David’s.

But custom required soldiers to remain celibate during war,
and Uriah,
 in contrast to David,
 is too loyal to his comrades
 to enjoy himself while they are suffering at war.

Uriah's loyalty has sealed his fate.

David sends word that Uriah is to be sent where the fighting is worst,
and then his comrades are to withdraw,
so that Uriah might be struck down.

David will protect himself at all costs.

In an act of coldness
reminiscent of the worst that humanity has to offer,
Uriah unknowingly carries those deadly orders to the front
in his own two hands.

Leonard Cohen again:

***I've seen your flag on the marble arch
love is not a victory march
it's a cold and it's a broken, Hallelujah!***

***Maybe there's a God above
and all I ever learned from love
was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you.***

David had learned
 how to shoot at those who outdrew him.
David practiced the kind of love
 that we so often seem most comfortable with.
 Victory,
 winning,
 right
 and wrong
 and forgiveness be damned.

 What I want
 and what I need,
 and the world can hang itself.

And that kind of love has left him broken.
 David was broken
 and he fell to pieces before the Lord of Life.

The story concludes with the prophet Nathan confronting David
 for the wrong he has done,

and David condemning himself
and repenting before the Lord.

***(Love) is not a cry you can hear at night
it's not somebody who's seen the light.
It's a cold and it's a broken, Hallelujah!***

We tell this story about David,
not because he has seen the light,
but because he has seen the dark.

We tell his story
because David has been to the darkest places we are likely to go
and found God waiting for him there.

Later,
when we tell the story of the Prince of Peace,
when Matthew reminds us of where Jesus came from,
he will talk about David,
the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

In the stories we tell,
about this Son of David,
the stories about his life and his death,
we are reminded

that no matter what,
no matter how broken or cold,

God is there,

in our darkest places.

Hallelujah!