

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 25, 2021**  
**11 Samuel 11:1-15**  
**“The Snare of Power” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

II Samuel 11:1–15

(CEB) John Gilbert

In the spring, when kings go off to war, David sent Joab, along with his servants and all the Israelites, and they destroyed the Ammonites, attacking the city of Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. One evening, David got up from his couch and was pacing back and forth on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone and inquired about the woman. The report came back: “Isn’t this Eliam’s daughter Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” So David sent messengers to take her. When she came to him, he had sex with her. (Now she had been purifying herself after her monthly period.) Then she returned home.<sup>5</sup> The woman conceived and sent word to David. “I’m pregnant,” she said. Then David sent a message to Joab: “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” So Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked about the welfare of Joab and the army and how the battle was going. Then David told Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet.” Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. However, Uriah slept at the palace entrance with all his master’s servants. He didn’t go down to his own house.<sup>10</sup> David was told, “Uriah didn’t go down to his own house,” so David asked Uriah, “Haven’t you just returned from a journey? Why didn’t you go home?” “The chest and Israel and Judah are all living in tents,” Uriah told David. “And my master Joab and my master’s troops are camping in the open field. How could I go home and eat, drink, and have sex with my wife? I swear on your very life, I will not do that!” Then David told Uriah, “Stay here one more day. Tomorrow I’ll send you back.” So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day. The next day David called for him, and he ate and drank, and David got him drunk. In the evening Uriah went out to sleep in the same place, alongside his master’s servants, but he did not go down to his own home. The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. He wrote in the letter, “Place Uriah at the front of the fiercest battle, and then pull back from him so that he will be struck down and die.”

If that story didn’t open your eyes or make you blush, you must have been napping. There’s a reason this is one of the most popular stories in the Old Testament, and it’s not because David is being a good boy.

Oh David. We laud him as the greatest of the kings of Israel. We like to remember David, the humble shepherd and the youngest brother in his family, who was unlikely to become king.

He battled the giant, Goliath, and won. He rose to the top as a military leader and attained success by uniting Israel and Judah into one great nation. If only the story could have stopped there. The fictional District Attorney in the Batman story, Harvey Dent, described David well. “You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly David wasn’t a villain was he? Today’s story certainly suggests he was. Unfortunately for David, Uriah had all of the virtues that were missing from David. He would sacrifice his own pleasure to protect God’s covenant. The only way David could hide his indiscretion, and Bathsheba’s pregnancy, was to set Uriah up to be killed in battle. Sounds like a villainous plot to me.

Today’s Scripture reading reminds us that David struggled with his human limitations. His leadership began to unravel when he planned to take Uriah’s wife as his own. Ah, the power of temptation.

Positions of authority bring opportunities to give into temptation and manipulate the system to get what they desire – money, power, sex. Public officials today are not much different than David. A quick online search and you can find all kinds of information about the sins of leaders. Wikileaks sound familiar? One of life’s unfortunate lessons is that our heroes are not saints. Athletes, actors, musicians, politicians, activists, even pastors – none are saints.

There are two Hebrew words that lead us to an important lesson in today’s reading. The first word is “shalah” which means “to send”. It is used in this chapter of 11 Samuel more than any other place in the Old Testament. The first place we see the word is when David “sends” for Bathsheba. It is a decadent misuse of his power to use his authority to take Uriah’s wife. Bathsheba is not without some power though, the next use of the word “shalah” is found when Bathsheba sends a note back to David to announce her pregnancy. Her announcement puts David in a difficult position and he gets to work trying to figure out how to cover up his crime. We see “shalah” again when Joab sends Uriah to David. There is only one character in the story who doesn’t have some agency to intervene in this story, and that’s Uriah. He is sent to David and then sent away by David and ultimately is sent to his death by David. The word “shalah” is like

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<sup>1</sup> Nolan, Christopher, “The Dark Knight”, 2008.

a neon sign pointing to the misuse and repercussions of power used with sin-centered motivation. Uriah, the one who stands out from the crowd because of his virtue, is the only one without the power to send.

The other word that is important in this section is the word “shalom” which means “peace” or “well-being”. Here, the word refers to “well-being”, but it’s used as a literary device to show us something. It marks something foreboding. There are two other passages in II Samuel where shalom is used this way. The first is earlier in II Samuel, and the second is later in II Samuel. In these verses, someone asks about the well-being of Abner and Absalom. Soon after they die or already dead. Again, there is a neon sign pointed right at Uriah when David asks about his “shalom”. And sure enough, Uriah dies in battle. We shouldn’t think that when we ask about someone’s well-being that they are about to die, but for the author of II Samuel, it was a way of getting our attention so that we could see something bad is about to happen.

The story of David is one of greatness and a fall. God anointed David to become King and he was a great leader, but things began to change when David lost his focus. He slipped in his discipline both on the battlefield and in his personal life. He became less worried about God and more worried about himself, and his life fell apart. That is an important lesson for all of us. When we lose our discipline and make our desires more important than God’s, things begin to fall apart.

Another lesson we can learn from David is that power is not bad in and of itself. In fact power can be an important means of healing and restoring justice when it takes on power that is corrupt. Power is only bad when it is used selfishly, carelessly and maliciously.

Right now we all have an opportunity to use our power for the good of others. The hot topic on the news is still about Covid-19. There are those who are refusing to get the vaccine for a variety of reasons. Some have been told it will harm their bodies, others have been told they can’t trust the government; some have been told that the virus is a sham and the vaccine is not needed. Some have been told that if they have enough faith in God, they will be protected from the vaccine. It is easy to feel frustrated with people who feel this way if you don’t. Some are calling this 4<sup>th</sup> wave the pandemic of the unvaccinated. I am sorry for those who have been misled; but I am more upset with leaders who are misusing their power for personal gain and at the expense of those who are dying.

I recognize that there may be circumstances that make the vaccine dangerous for some. It could be a health condition or an allergy to the components of the vaccine. But not getting the vaccine for a conspiracy theory, a political view, or even a religious reason is damaging many lives. As of yesterday, there were 35,311,651 cases of the coronavirus in the US. There have been 626,692 deaths and the CDC projects that by October we may have to resume mask mandates and shut downs all over again.

As Presbyterians, we believe that God has given each of us power and abilities to be used for the common good. Among those are the healers – doctors, nurses, scientists – people who give their lives to saving others. The statistics are now clear that those who have received the vaccine are better off than those who haven't. It works, thanks to our scientists. Those who are unvaccinated now account for more than 90% of the deaths. But that doesn't mean that those who are vaccinated are in the clear. There are break through cases of the virus and as the virus has the opportunity to mutate, the effectiveness of the vaccine may be limited. Our children are still not vaccinated and are at risk. In recent days, doctors and community leaders have asked clergy to use their power to encourage their members to get the vaccine and help control this virus. As your pastor, I am doing just that. If you are with us in person or are watching us online and haven't gotten the vaccine, I ask you to find the nearest place to get one if your health allows. I will be thankful to you for looking out for the well-being of others.

You have the power to do good things with your life and make a difference. It could be as simple as getting a vaccine or encouraging a friend to get one. It could be as a research scientist who will develop the next vaccine. It could be as a parent or teacher that you can guide people to work for the well-being of society. I ask you to think about where you have power in your life and how you can use it to do good. Last week, Mitch shared the motto of the UniteKC organization, "Do one good thing." What is that one good thing you can do today? Whatever you do, do it for the sake of glorifying God who believes in us and came to live among us and die for us that we might have life. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3; Season after Pentecost; pp. 180-183.