

Go to War
February 16th, 2014

2 Samuel 11:1-17, 26, 27
Epiphany 6 A

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You know the old saying, “Big things have small beginnings.” A rockslide starts from a few loose pebbles, a forest fire blazes from just a stray spark and the course of history can be changed with a few carefully chosen words. Many large-scale and volatile events start from very small and seemingly unimportant beginnings. From things that, by themselves and out of context, we would never even give a second thought. Of course as we grow up we learn where these small and innocent actions can be very dangerous and we learn to be careful with them when it is necessary. And that’s exactly the kind of lesson that God wants to teach us from our account today.

<read text: 2 Samuel 11:1-17, 26, 27>

Now, a lot of times when we read this story or when we look at it, we focus on what David did wrong here. I mean in the sense that he committed adultery with another man’s wife and then when he got her pregnant, spiraled into even more sin to try to cover up his crime. But to start with the adultery is to start in the wrong place, because you don’t even have to look that carefully to see it starts before that. Though maybe you missed the real beginning of all this, I don’t know; did you catch it? How did the account start? It was the time for kings to go off to war, and David sent his commander and army out to fight the battles...but David himself stayed home.

It might not seem like that big of a deal, but it was a neglect of his responsibility as king. The whole point of a king was to lead the people and fight their battles. He was to govern and protect. And especially at that time, that was expected to be a very hands-on job. But this time, David stayed home. And now, at home, enjoying the leisure instead of the fight, he wanders the palace in the middle of the night and spies something from the view his balcony affords him. He sees a beautiful woman bathing and he finds her attractive. Rather than averting his gaze, walking off into another part of the palace, he continues to look. And seeing as how his kingly authority affords him the advantage, he sends for her and completes the desire that had been building in him since he saw her.

And we know how this plays out. The married woman becomes pregnant. But rather than face up to what he’d done, David tries to trick Bathsheeba’s husband Uriah into thinking the child is his. And when that doesn’t work he gets the man drunk, and when that doesn’t work he simply has the man killed so he won’t find out and won’t get the chance to tell anyone the baby wasn’t his. There is certainly here a severe lesson about the consequence of using one sin to cover another rather than simply coming clean about what we’ve done. If we don’t confront it and call it what it is, if we try to hide from it, then one sin begets another and leads us to very dark places. As I said, big things have small beginnings.

But it’s not the consequences of the “big things” I want to focus on today. It’s the small beginnings. Because like I said, if we know to be careful around the small stuff, we can prevent the big disasters from ever starting. It’s not like David’s situation here was unavoidable. It’s not like he was tempted beyond his means. Look at who we are talking about and the situation he was in. Here we have King David. The man after the Lord’s own heart! The boy who stood up to the giant Goliath on his trust in the Lord alone. The man who so revered the Lord, that he would not harm the Lord’s anointed one, Saul, even when Saul was trying to kill him. A man of integrity, principle and courage. A man, most of all who had as solid a trust in the Lord as God as anyone who came before him. Here was a real hero of faith.

And it’s not like this sin of adultery should be particularly tempting to David. He wasn’t living in the palace like a monk. As we learn later on in Samuel, David had plenty of wives already (a topic that I am not going to get into here). You look at the situation, at the man himself and David had every reason *not* to do this. And yet...it did. He was careless. He did not guard himself against the sins in his heart, and that spilled out into actions of adultery and murder. Ideally David should have gone to war like he was supposed to, and none of this would have happened. But he also should have gone to war against the sin in his heart, but instead he let it stay there, and it nearly destroyed him.

This is the small beginnings I want to speak of today. It’s the things that begin quietly, in the hidden places no one knows about but ourselves and God. We lie to ourselves about these sins so much that we start to believe the lies. We think of them as minor, if we even consider them sin at all. No one else sees them, no one is hurt by them...God can’t

really care about them all that much, can he? But God does care. In fact, you could almost say, he cares *more* about the attitudes that go on in our heart than the actions themselves. Jesus made that very clear in our gospel reading today. Controlling the outward actions is not enough, God is concerned about the heart of our lives. A man who rages against another, attacks him and harms or kills him...that is no different to our God than the man whose anger burns silently but does nothing because he fears the consequences of those actions. In fact, when God picked David as king of Israel he said, **“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”** (1 Sa 16:7).

And it's more than just that God is concerned about the attitudes of our heart, but he understands that things like this do not stay in the heart forever. Jesus said on another occasion, **“What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’ ”** (Mk 7:20-23). You can almost think of the heart as a pitcher of water that we fill up from the inside. Our words and our actions that everyone sees are poured out of that pitcher. Now it may be possible to poison that water a little and not have it show when poured, but eventually if we fill our hearts up with evil thoughts, they are going to come out in our lives, and as we saw here with David, that can bring some very serious consequences.

We all have within each of us a sinful nature that wants nothing more than to fill our hearts with poison. To corrupt us to the point that God is driven out of us completely. And if we don't take it seriously, if we don't go to war against it, then it will overpower us from the inside out and it will destroy us. We need to be on our guard against every form it takes. That person who aggravates us, we can't let that anger build because it will come out. In Christ, we need to be at peace with them. Obviously, the thoughts of lust that David wrestled with can lead all kinds of bad places. Or maybe that jealousy over someone else's life, we need to turn back to what God has given us and be content with it. Perhaps even our grief is with God himself, growing resentful over what he's allowed to happen to us or upset because the roles he lays out for us in our lives aren't what we think we should have. We need to return to a sure trust in him before that resentment boils over into unbelief.

We like to think these thoughts are harmless to entertain and go nowhere, but that isn't always the case. We can't afford to let the sinful nature wander freely in our hearts, but we must stand ready to fight at all times against it. Some might say, “Well these thoughts just pop into my head, I can't help that!” and that's true enough. But there's a difference between having the thought and entertaining it, lingering on it. Martin Luther is quoted as saying on this subject, “I can't stop birds from flying over my head, but I can stop them from nesting in my hair.” If we are vigilant and on guard, we will recognize these thoughts when they come as selfish and wrong and we can stop them before they ever get started and long before they spill out into the rest of our lives.

Now, we've spent our time here talking about how we, as Christians, should strive to live our lives of faith. And rightly so, there are dangers for us if we let our guard down. But, before we finish I just want to make some things perfectly clear. First, your salvation is in no way dependent upon your performance. We strive to avoid sin because it pleases our Father and because it makes our lives better and helps us avoid natural consequences. But the punishment for sin is already paid for and that cannot be taken away. The sinful nature is going to win a few. Probably more than a few, really. And every time that we return to our God in repentance he will have the same words for us, “I forgive you.” This is a battle we fight, and occasionally the enemy is going to slip through, but as long as we are fighting, we will not lose the war.

And we will not lose because we are not fighting with our own strength. All of the things I talked about avoiding in the heart today can only be done through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the power of God dwelling within us and his strength comes to us through his chosen means, the gospel in word and sacrament. The more we stay connected to his word and his sacrament at every opportunity, then the more of these fights will be won, and the more we will have the strength to go on fighting this war within.

So take a good, long look inside yourself. Shine the light of God on those dark places of your heart and see the enemy for who it is. Recognize that sinful nature when it crops up in you, and with the power of God on your side, go to war against it. Amen.