

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 12, 2016

II Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15

The Word That Kills and Makes Alive!

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Any list of "*Old Testament Heroes*" would have to rank King David near the top. He was the most beloved, famous king of Israel.

But, as my father, a professor of Old Testament often said, "*There are no human heroes in the Old Testament - God is the only hero of this story!*" Because, just like every other so-called hero of the Old Testament, David had shortcomings and sins just like the rest of us.

Let me recap the sordid details for you.

One evening, David, who was already married, was standing on the palace rooftop when he spied a beautiful woman bathing. He was smitten with her. He **just had to have her**.

And, of course, as a king **he was used to getting what he wanted**.

So, even though he knew she was married to Uriah, one of his soldiers, David had Bathsheba brought to the palace and he slept with her. She became pregnant, and David wanted to get her husband out of the way.

So he secretly told his general to place Uriah in the front line, and have the troops withdraw from him during the heat of battle so that Uriah would be killed. And that's what happened.

After the required time of mourning, Bathsheba moves into the palace and becomes one of David's wives.

This terrible sin of David's must have BROKEN GOD'S HEART. But **God refuses to abandon David**, in spite of his sin, because **God has plans for David**.

God plans that the SAVIOR OF THE WORLD will come from the house of this king.

But God can't just ignore David's sin, and the job of showing David his guilt falls to the prophet, Nathan. Now Nathan knows if he comes right out and confronts David about it, he'll be killed or thrown into prison.

So he comes up with a brilliant plan to show David his sin and his need for forgiveness. **Nathan tells a parable** – a story which **pulls David in and grabs him with the truth**, which is how parables are supposed to work.

It's the story of a poor man who had only one little lamb, and a rich man who had more lambs than he could count.

When the rich man had unexpected company, he didn't want to kill one of his own flock, so he simply took the little lamb that belonged to his poor neighbor.

Now when King David hears this story, he reacts with righteous anger. He declares that **any man who would do such a wicked thing deserves to die!**

And then..... **Nathan delivers the punch-line:** one of the most powerful sentences in the bible. The prophet points a gnarled old finger at the king and says,

"YOU ARE THE MAN! You are the sinner. You are the one who deserves to die. God gave you everything, but still you took poor Uriah's wife. And then, on top of adultery, you committed murder to cover your tracks!"

Nathan speaks God's powerful Word to the King and then..... a miracle happens!

This proud and mighty king is changed. He repents, saying: *"I have sinned against the Lord. I'm guilty."* And immediately, Nathan pronounces God's forgiveness.

God's word of Law brings about honest repentance, and God's forgiveness is declared. The **repentance and the forgiveness are real.** And yet, the **consequences of David's evil deed are not so easily erased.**

The first child born to him and Bathsheba will die, and there will be strife within the family.

But God still decides to **use this sinner to bring about the salvation of the world.**

Centuries after both David and Bathsheba have been laid to rest, a child is born to their household; a child whose name will be praised above every other name on earth: Jesus, the savior.

You see, **God uses David and his descendants to bring about the salvation of the entire world.**

- But **that couldn't have happened** if David had not repented of his sin.
- And that couldn't happen until he was **confronted with the Word of God, pointing out his sinfulness.**

Many of us grew up within an extremely conservative pietism; a religion that said, *"Christians don't smoke, drink, or dance,"* and the list went on and on.

This piety often led to a kind of legalism. Christianity was reduced to **nothing more than a set of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots."**

Being a Christian and being "saved" were **all about doing your best to obey God's laws.**

If you tried hard enough, then when you died you'd get into heaven.

Somehow, the gospel of salvation by grace as a gift – this glorious gospel – got lost along the way. And so, for many of us, **when we finally heard that true gospel, it was an astonishing discovery, almost like Martin Luther's own experience of it.**

Now, when a Christian **discovers the failings of legalism**, there is a danger that our reaction will **blind us to the proper role of God's law.**

But in fact, **proper Lutheran reading of scripture and proper Lutheran preaching** recognize BOTH the Gospel and the Law.

And the **main role of the law is to point out our sins, and send us fleeing to the cross of Jesus Christ.**

The Law **cannot save**. ONLY THE GOSPEL CAN SAVE. But the Law **can** prepare us to truly receive the gospel.

It's **not very popular nowadays to preach the law**. I remember a church in the Twin Cities that advertised: **"No Guilt – All Grace."** I'm sure that was attractive to many.

But **without a true sense of our sin, we can't really appreciate the radical, awesome nature of God's unconditional forgiveness in Jesus Christ.**

If there's no bad news about me – I don't think I need the good news about Jesus.

Proper Lutheran preaching has always emphasized **BOTH aspects of God's Word: the Law and the gospel**. You see, it's the law which can show us our sin, our broken-ness; our need for a savior.

It's the law which points a finger at us and says,

- *"You are the man!"*
- *You are the woman!*
- *You are a sinner in need of forgiveness."*

But the law is a dead end. It can't take us any further. FOR THAT WE NEED THE GOSPEL.

The gospel tells us what our God has done to rescue us from the accusation of the law.

To use classic Lutheran language, ***"the law kills, and the gospel makes alive again."***

The law of God knocks all the props out from under us. It rips away **all of our illusions about being "good enough" to get into heaven.**

The law tells us, ***"there are no exceptions, no not one. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."***

Unless you are able to keep God's laws perfectly, which no one can do, than there's **no way of getting into heaven by showing God your good record of achievement or effort.**

In 9th grade confirmation, we look closely at this question. Because it's **always tempting to try to find a loophole.**

It's natural to try to justify ourselves by saying, *"well at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so. At least I've never killed anyone, or stolen, or committed adultery."*

And so I point out Jesus' words about the Fifth Commandment, *"You shall not kill."* He says,

"If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

And if that's not enough to convince them, I add Martin Luther's words:

"this commandment is also violated when a person fails to do good to his neighbor, or fails to protect and save him from suffering bodily harm or injury. ...If you see anyone suffer hunger and do not feed him, you have let him starve to death."

This is just one example, but, in fact, with every commandment, the impossible demand is for perfection.

So you see, no matter how much we might protest that at least we're better than other people, we must admit it: we are indeed, **"the man" who has sinned.** We are **"the woman" in need of forgiveness.**

Nathan might just as well come into our home and point his finger at us. WE'RE GUILTY.

And you know what? **It's okay to admit it! In fact, it's better than okay.** Because, when we can admit it – when we can sincerely confess our sins, **then and only then, a wonderful thing can happen: the gospel can come rushing in!**

In order to give us ETERNAL LIFE, God must first KILL US AND ALL OUR FOOLISH PRIDE.

Then, this same God speaks **a wonderful word of gospel**, which tells us that despite our sin, despite our inability to even begin to save ourselves, God has chosen to save us through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

IT'S A FREE GIFT – IT'S GRACE!

Of course we can try to resist God's word of law.

We can **refuse to admit that we are captive to sin**. But if we do that, then **we'll miss out on the really good stuff**.

If we refuse to acknowledge our need of saving, then we'll NEVER EXPERIENCE THE TRUE JOY OF BELONGING TO THE SAVIOR.

But if, by grace, we can hear God's word and respond along with King David, *"I have sinned against the Lord."*

Then **the joy of forgiveness can become real for us, AND THE RADIANT LIGHT OF SALVATION CAN FILL OUR HEARTS AND OUR LIVES.**

MAY GOD GRANT SUCH GRACE TO EACH OF US. AMEN.