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Amazing Grace

Psalm 51

Even the latest episode of *Desperate Housewives* or *CSI* pales before this story. But one of the reasons Scripture has the ring of authority is that it offers the straight scoop, the unvarnished assessment of even heroes and heroines, like King David.

The scene is a Spring evening in Jerusalem. The rains have ended; the roads are dry; the weather is mild. So it's time for plundering neighboring tribes. One of David's kingly duties is to lead his troops into battle. But this particular evening David isn't with his troops. He's pushing 50 now and if there's any camping to be done he wants it to be in his palace suite. In his middle-age, David's now thinking of comfort, not duty, of pleasure, not responsibility. In fact, soon he won't be thinking much at all.

It's early evening. David rises from a short nap and paces on his palace roof. He's bored, with time on his hands. He scans the horizon, the approaching sunset, and then the courtyards below. And, hello, who's this – there's a strikingly attractive young naked woman bathing, safe from any prying eyes except the resident of the tallest building in town. David stares with more than a passing interest. He summons a servant – who is that woman?

The servant tries to smother David's lust, "Isn't that Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" In other words, "David, she's not an object; she has a name, an identity. She's from a noble family, and DAVID, she's married to one of your most loyal soldiers! So David, get a grip – the ten commandments aren't ten suggestions – number seven is about adultery!"

Alas, David has put away his scroll of Exodus and isn't about to be deterred. "Fetch her," he orders, like you'd fetch an animal or a bucket of water. And despite having access to a dozen other women who could join him in evening festivities, David pursues Bathsheba. So this isn't just about sex. It's about power, domination, and thinking he's above the law. It's about David thinking that he's . . . God! So Bathsheba is summoned, and the deed is done.

Bathsheba returns home, almost as if she's now an embarrassment. But just wait! In a few weeks, Bathsheba sends David a terse two-word note, "I'm pregnant." David gulps, and says nothing to Bathsheba, nada, not a word. Instead he leaps into damage control. Plotting how to protect his royal neck, he sends for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. Uriah must be pleased. He has an audience with the king, with King David

himself. They exchange pleasantries. David asks, "How's the battle going?" Then tells Uriah, "Go home, and enjoy your wife."

But alas, Uriah doesn't go home to hopefully take care of David's "problem." He sleeps at the entrance to the palace, joining those who protect David's life. When David asks, "Why didn't you go home?" Uriah is infuriatingly pure. "When my colleagues are at war, defending our country, how could I go home and lie with my wife." Ouch! That last line must have stung David.

So David ups the damage control. He tries Plan B, and arranges a dinner party where he plies Uriah with wine. David gives Uriah glass after glass, hoping that the alcohol will accomplish what last night did not. But again Uriah sleeps with the palace guard and doesn't return to Bathsheba's bed. Uriah is more noble drunk than David is sober! Now David's really worried.

So David tries Plan C. He gives Uriah a sealed note that is actually his death warrant. The note tells General Joab, "Put Uriah in the front lines where the fighting is fiercest. Then when the enemy attacks, quickly retreat so Uriah will be struck down and killed." Like a good general, Joab follows David's instructions to the letter. The battle begins; Uriah is put at the apex of the attack; the enemy strikes; the Israelites flee, and poor, noble Uriah is killed. When Bathsheba hears the news, she wails in dismay. Then David sends for her, "You poor, grieving widow. Let me comfort you. Come be my wife." The problem's solved. So what if David broke the commandments, "Do not covet! Do not commit adultery! Do not murder!" After all, this is the ancient world where kings have the power to do anything they please. Except in Israel . . .

Enter the prophet Nathan. Nathan knows a frontal attack will be quite fatal, so he begins with a story, "Once upon a time there was a wealthy herder who had 100s of sheep and cattle. A guest comes, and the herder decides to throw a party. But he doesn't take one of his own sheep or cattle. Instead he creeps over to the home of a poor man who has but one animal, a little ewe lamb named "Fluffy," who is the family pet. The herder seizes Fluffy, turns her into lamb chops, and serves up the banquet.

Then Nathan asks, "Now, O King, what should we do?" David is so outraged that he spits out, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!" Boom! Nathan levels his sights, "You are the man! Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" And in quick succession, David's rage turns to shock, then disbelief, then guilt and finally fear. Then at some point, David prays the anguished Psalm that is our text this morning:

Psalm 51

We don't need to spend much time on the issue of adultery. We all know that it's bad news. Adultery betrays our spouse, violates our marriage vows, destroys our home, and

generally shipwrecks our lives. It also destroys our relationship with God. David thinks he has dealt with his problem. But God knows what has happened, and in Israel, unlike every other ancient nation, the King isn't above the law. David himself has written, "Why do the nations rage? Why do the people waste their time with futile plans? . . . The one who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them . . . Now then, you kings, act wisely! Be warned, you rulers of the earth! Serve the Lord with reverent fear, and rejoice with trembling." Neither King David nor New York governor Elliott Spitzer nor any of us escape God's watchful eye.

And we do notice with thanksgiving that God uses flawed human beings to do his work. Abraham and Sarah are old, even according to our standards, but they're the ones who follow God's call to the promised land. Jacob steals his brother's birthright and is rightly called "the deceiver." Joseph, literally with the long-sleeved cloak, is insufferably arrogant. No wonder his brothers can't stand him. Moses murders an Egyptian overseer. Rahab is a prostitute. Samson is a womanizer. God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet when he is a young teen. And on it goes.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a young peasant girl. Joseph, her husband, may be a carpenter, but the Greek word used to describe him is usually translated "manual laborer." Peter can't keep his sandal out of his mouth. Thomas doubts. James and John want to call down fire from heaven to zap unbelievers. How's that for showing the love of Jesus! And then, there's David . . . this debauched, lustful misogynist who impregnates an associate's wife and then kills her husband.

But God can redeem the most broken life; He can use the most humble among us; our shortcomings and failures do not disqualify us from serving our God of grace and mercy.

Not that there aren't consequences. We do reap what we sow. It is said, "Sow a thought; reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a lifestyle. Sow a lifestyle, reap a destiny." David's transgression and sin reverberate for generations. David's son Ammon rapes his half-sister Tamar leading another of David's sons to kill Ammon. Solomon's dalliance with foreign wives turns him from obedience to the Lord and sets into motion events that split Israel in two. Our actions, for good or ill, are like ripples caused when we toss a rock into a still pond. They spread further and further, often beyond what we expect.

But while all of that is well and good, what bothers us about this text is that it seems blatantly unfair. It's like O.J. confessing to killing Nicole and getting off with probation. Imagine being Uriah's mother. David commits adultery with your daughter-in-law, kills your son, and ends up marrying his dear wife. Even if David's confession is utterly sincere, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great compassion . . . blot out my transgressions and cleanse me from sin." Even if David realizes that he has to deal with God, "Against You, O God, You only have I sinned." Even if David begins to long

for a life of purity, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." Still it isn't just or right or fair that David continue to rule with Bathsheba by his side!

There is sanctity to marriage, sacredness. Genesis talks of a husband and wife being naked and unashamed, of being transparent, vulnerable, open to both giving and receiving. In the Jewish tradition, a husband and wife are married under a small canopy, the chuppah. It symbolizes God's covering and protection for the couple. But under this chuppah there is room for only two people. So in marriage, we share intimacies which no one else knows, jokes that only we understand, a history that is unique and special. If we're wise, we guard that uniqueness with all our hearts. But now this union between Uriah and Bathsheba is shattered. And that is so wrong!

So what is our text about? It is about the mystery of grace. Grace is God's free, unmerited love. It is not deserved; it is not earned. It is a gift. It is a slave trader named John Newton, knowing that he has done horrific wrong that cannot be undone, yet realizing that God has not deserted him. So he writes the familiar hymn, "*Amazing Grace*, how sweet the sound, that saved a *wretch* like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see." Grace is the prodigal son, recklessly squandering his inheritance, breaking his father's heart, then limping home, expecting a door that should be barred and locked shut. But there is his father running toward him, sweating, sleeves flapping, gasping, "Thank God, you're home."

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly condemns "cheap grace." This devout man of God left a secure teaching post at Union Seminary in New York City in 1938 in order to return to Nazi Germany. "How can I speak to my brothers or sisters in Christ," he said, "if I am not there to share our life together?" Bonhoeffer was arrested, taken to Flossenburg concentration camp, and hung seventeen days before the camp was liberated. So he knows of what he speaks,

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

"True grace," Bonhoeffer says, "is costly grace. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life." But grace is still grace!

Grace is startling because it is unexpected and undeserved. But we're hungry for grace because grace tells us, "You can put the past behind you. Let it go, once and for all." We're hungry for grace because grace tells us, "Let go of your endless efforts to measure up, to be good enough, to live by your father's rules or your mother's insecurities. Be yourself, who God created you to be."

We're hungry for grace because grace tells us, "Yes, you've blown it. Welcome to the club. If you can, put things right. If you can't, stop beating yourself up. Get back in touch with God and ask, "Create in me a pure heart and put a right Spirit within me." And grace tells us, "Stop judging others by impossible standards. You are forgiven, so be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving towards others."

David didn't deserve a second chance. None of us do. But the calculus of grace yields a different solution than sin = punishment. The calculus of God's grace is most fully expressed when the Apostle Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of God? Paul's answer, "No one! For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither height nor depth, neither principalities or powers, neither the present nor the future, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord!" Friends, that's grace! Thanks be to God!