

ENGAGING PASSION - THE POWER OF A STORY

Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 12:1-7a

A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgist Beth Amsbury

As we seek to respond to Your word and will and to encourage each other in the growth of our minds and spirits, God help us to hear the words of your scripture from second Samuel chapter 12, verses 1 through 7.

2 Samuel 12¹

The thing that David had done displeased the Lord...

What did David do?

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

(2 Samuel 11:1-27², retold)

The spring of the year in the time when kings go off to war, King David stayed in Jerusalem. And getting off of his couch one day, he wandered around on his roof and he saw down below a beautiful woman. He inquired who she was and it was told him that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. And David sent out his soldiers to go and take Bathsheba, and he had sex with her and he sent her home.

...

She told him, "I am pregnant." In order to cover up what he had done, he called Uriah back from the battlefield. He told Uriah, "Go and sleep with your wife." But Uriah refused, being a good man.³ He got Uriah drunk and said Uriah, "Go home." Uriah would not go home. And so unable to cover up what he had done, David sent Uriah back to the battlefield and he told his general, "At the time of the fiercest part of the battle bring Uriah to the front line and when the fighting goes fierce, draw back your man and leave Uriah alone." And Uriah was killed.

And David took Bathsheba into his palace and he married her and they had a child.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² Ibid.

³ He was good because he observed the religious law: "Continence was required of soldiers consecrated for war by religious sanction (1 Sam 21.4-5)." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, containing the Old and New Testaments*, An Ecumenical Study Bible, ©1977, 1989, Oxford University Press, p. 398 OT.

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Beth Amsbury

2 Samuel 12:1-7⁴

The thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David. And the prophet said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and it drink from his cup, and laid in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man's house. The rich man was loath to take one of his own flocks or herds to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, so he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Sometimes our lives come down to a single moment of time,

"You are the man!"

In the news over the past days, weeks, months, years,

We have heard men,

 police officers, leaders, government officials, entertainment leaders
 named again and again, "You are the man!"

And again and again we have seen

 modeled to us and to our children

 How men might respond at times like this:

 to deny, to reject, to cover over, to cover up, to turn away.

Sometimes our lives come down to a verb;

 What is the verb that we are called to respond with.

 What's the verb in your life that needs to come to life today?

And for David it was this: "I have sinned."⁵ ... "I have sinned."

Instead of another story,

 Instead of another cover-up,

 Instead of another denial,

A simple statement, "I have sinned."

And then, it is true, the King opens himself up to whatever might happen

But also to the possibility of something more happening

Than that small story that had imprisoned his life.

⁴ The Holy Bible, NRSV, Old Testament, ©1989.

⁵ 2 Samuel 12:13, Holy Bible NSRV.

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So what about you? And what about me? And what about this time in this community of faith? I mean, what do we – us – need to come clean about? What do we need to come clean about so that there is a possibility of a new story, of a bigger story for you, for me, for us, for our world? What needs to happen? Perhaps you are sitting today in a place of knowing that there is something that needs to be found and named and acknowledged, something that's sitting on the *passion* that your life wants to break forth into. And for me this is not just a nice Scripture question or an academic question, a “nice question for Sunday morning.” This is a real, pressing question in my life – and I would hold for you and yours, as well. And it's this.

In, what is it, 11 weeks – 11 short weeks – I will stand here before you on December 30 on my last Sunday with you as your pastor and I will open the liturgy and I will ask you, "Will you forgive me for the mistakes that I have made?" And you will look down in your bulletins and will say, "Peter, we forgive you." And then you will look in your bulletins and you will read, "And Peter, will you forgive us for the mistakes we have made?" And I will look down and read, "And I forgive you." And for that millisecond of time everything will be all right in the world.

But what if, ... what if our work right now for you, for me, for all of us, for our world is not to make it well for a millisecond of time but to really make a different world, for your life and my life to be opened up in newness, in possibility, in wider grace and compassion, a bigger story that we can all be set free to live in. And what has to happen for that to happen? What are the conversations that, yes, perhaps *you and me* need to have together, that *we* need to have together, that *you* need to have with that somebody in your life you know that you need to have that conversation with because you, too, want to start the New Year in a place with the possibility that you haven't lived into and for and fully known, a bigger passion and a bigger compassion.

Sung prayer.

Take, O take me as I am;
Summon out what I shall be;
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Take, O take me as I am;
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.⁶

It was only a few years after I had started here as one of your pastors and it was the *biggest* Sunday of our whole church year – it's our Offering of Gifts Sunday. The third Sunday in December. Congregation packed. People come forward with presents. They bring forward for all these good works around the city. And the whole service ends in the long tradition that has been, the congregation is surrounding the whole sanctuary, and we wait as the children, the preschoolers come in bearing their gifts and the whole congregation sings "Away in the manger." It's a beautiful, beautiful moment. Well, on this particular year I decided that No, at the last minute, we really didn't

⁶ Bell, John L. "Take, O Take Me As I Am." 1995 Iona Community, admin. GIA Publications Inc. Publication information accessed 12/6/2018 at https://hymnary.org/text/take_o_take_me_as_i_am.

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need to do that. That that was kind of too much of a bother or whatever the story was. And I didn't go get the children. And I didn't invite them in.

And after service on that day, we had *angry* parents. We had *disappointed* parents. We had *sad and teary* members of this congregation who said "There was a moment and we didn't get to do that moment!" Well, I went and scurried around and made the phone calls and talked to some moms and dads and members here and said, "Gosh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry," and I thought I was off the hook.

But then, [I was] gifted by the good pastor in my life in those days [who] turned to me and said, "Peter, you know you got to say you're sorry to the whole congregation." I was just appalled! You've got to be kidding! I mean, at the time of your life as a young adult, young man at that point when my whole life is about showing you how competent and how good I am to have to stand up in front of all of you and say, "I blew it." But there I went, full of fear and trembling on that Christmas Pageant Sunday and, before the pageant began, stood up in front right here and said, "I am sorry. I made a mistake."

I wonder for you and for me what do we need to own up to, what do we need to get clean about so that we can begin again? And who would know? Who could have guessed at that time that this would become such a rhythm for me and you together? *How many times*, Peter, do you have to stand up here in front of all of you or you or individuals!?! *How many letters*, Peter, do you have to send out to say, "My gosh! Your life went like this. And then like that. And like ... and like that. ... It's good that you're learning how to sail!"

So it was only a few other years later, I had just started is the Youth Minister here at the church and it was our very first middle school mission trip. We had 20 some kids going on the mission trip. And it was hard and tiring; and that's a good story and a lot of work. And, yes, it sure was. And a lot of kids to keep track of, sure it was. At the very end of the mission trip, I lost my cool. I mean that car alarm went off one too many times. And I lost it. I stamped my foot. I *swore*. Oh! I got angry. And I *dropped* the ball. I so dropped the ball, I lost track of kids I needed to keep track of. Stuff happened that shouldn't have happen. People got hurt. Kids got hurt. And parents came home and they were not pleased.

And I wasn't pleased either. Oh, my gosh, here I was trying to show how good I could be, I could, yes, show good care for your kids and, oh my gosh, I blew it. ... I blew it. I blew it. I blew it. ... I stood in front of parents, talked to parents. But I stood in front of the whole group of kids and parents and said, "I'm sorry. I blew it. I... I didn't do ... and wasn't all I hoped, hoped to be."

But the thing was, I couldn't let go of it.

And I wonder about for you: Is there something that you just can't let go of? Is there something you just can't release?

I've been gifted in these days that are truly ... – I mean it's been full of an outbreak of great love but also great sorrow in my life as I prepare to say goodbye to you. And, um, not cry. Um. But I am

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reading this book called "The Wild Edge of Sorrow."⁷ And I commend it to you. And Francis Weller says this. He said, you know, there's that first kind of grief we all know. It's when somebody dies, and we know something of that grief – and don't know anything about it again and again. And then there's other kinds of grief including this, there's the things that we can't grieve for because they're not worthy of our grief. Do you have things like that in your life? I mean, it's the things that say they're not worthy of kindness or warmth or compassion. They're *bad* parts of us, they're really terrible and messy parts of us, and we can't even bring them out in the light of day. All we do is we clothe them and cloak them in shame. And we put them away.

And I wonder about for you and for me, what are those things we need to take out of the closet of our life and take out and put here and say you know this, too, is worthy of love and compassion and care and forgiveness. To forgive ourself.

Long ago there was a movie "The Mission." Some of you may have seen the movie it's about Jesuit missionaries in South America and there's this general who, like King David, has gone and has killed a man, and, in fact, he has killed many men – indigenous peoples – and he can't forgive himself. He *can't* forgive himself. And to punish himself he takes this huge rock. And he goes and he climbs up this mountain pulling this rock, – this huge rock – behind them. And I wonder about you and I think that about me: What's the rock? What's the *rock* you're still pulling behind you that you need somebody to cut, release, and hold in compassion.

In the very long time it takes to come to the place of saying, "God I need to listen to Your call. I don't want to, but You're calling me out into this great unknown to go and discover what's next, and what's the next chapter of your life." In all of that time and all the conversations it takes to come to the place in the place of encouragement and courage to say that, you have lots of conversations.

And so I had a conversation with some clergy colleagues this summer. And they said to me, "Gosh, Peter, you know it just sounds like you want to..., you want to do this leave-taking with your church *perfectly*." I said, "Well, yes!" And they said, "Well... What if it wasn't supposed to be perfect? What if your invitation is it's supposed to be messy?" That took a while for me to take in: to be messy. And it has been. It has been an incredible grace of messiness – in the last month since I sent out that letter to all of you saying that I was having a season of saying goodbye.

I sat in front of the whole church staff to tell them I was leaving. I burst into tears. Came back and I said, "I have some news to share." They laughed. And I burst into tears again. Then I finally said "I'm preparing to say goodbye."

And you know, the people have said, "You know, Peter... Boy you show a lot of courage – step out there in the complete unknown. Wow, I admire that." I don't know if it's courage or not. But I'll tell you this. I'll tell you the only reason I can step forward into that unknown is because of the faith you have instilled in me here. And it's the faith in this. And you have shown it to me time and time and time again, as I have stood before you in my all-too-real and stumbling self. And you, just like Nathan,

⁷ Weller, Francis (©2015). *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Published September 2015: North Atlantic Books; per personal communication from author francisgweller@gmail.com 12/06/2018.

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you know, you could have gone so quickly to just condemnation; that could be the end of the story, right? But you haven't. Like Nathan. He didn't want to just condemn David. He wanted him to have the opportunity to know and be transformed by a bigger story. There it is. He was going to have to bear the consequences of what he did and he did!

But there's a bigger story and it's God's compassion, God's grace, and God's love. And you, you Church have reminded this pastor of that Gospel again and again and it's changed my life, from no longer saying, "Yeah, Peter, it's all about doing it right, and getting it perfectly, and holding it all together. But you know, Peter, and you and me, you can just drop your arms."

Sung prayer

Take, O take me as I am;
Summon out what I shall be;
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Thank you Church for remembering the Gospel, for holding the Gospel, and teaching this pastor again and again the Gospel truth, that the story of my life is bigger than that particular small story of my life, but held in a much wider, bigger story of God's abundant compassion and grace and love. That's the story, Church. Keep on preaching. Keep on speaking. It changes lives. – Amen.

UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew

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