

“Practicing Pentecost: After Corruption  
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2 Samuel 11:1-15

I know an educator who was asked to address a junior high assembly and was told to “Avoid abstraction; remember you are dealing with concrete thinkers.” Well, the David and Bathsheba story is plenty concrete; not much abstraction here. I’ve been trying to remember the flannel board teachings of the shepherd-boy turn king story I received as a kid. Safe and sanitized, I suspect, at least compared to today’s standards in which little is safe or sanitized. Remember hearing this story for the first time? Would we even need to explain to a class of 7<sup>th</sup> graders today why David summoned Bathsheba to his bedroom? I’m not sure if the class would even giggle at David’s attempts to get Uriah to sleep with Uriah’s wife, pretending to be a good friend by offering a meal, several drinks and an Uber lift home. Maybe we no longer bat an eye when we read that David takes Bathsheba. Did anybody flinch when we read that he murders Uriah and his men? Or is this just collateral damage that is explainable and expected?

Much of art and commentary through the years have suggested that the story of David and Bathsheba reveals a tryst between consenting adults, resulting from Bathsheba’s plan to seduce David. The inference is that her beauty is just too much for the good king that God wants on the throne. But today, we are in a better position to agree that there is never a balance of sexual power in a king’s kingdom, not even in a king’s harem. We know now that when a king’s press secretary tells a story, well, all unwelcome sexual advances and assaults are sanitized from the record, at least as much as possible. And yet, even after a scrubbing, the story as we have it has David in complete control: David chooses to remain behind when he was expected to be off to war, a fact unknown to Bathsheba. And he is the subject of most of the verbs: David inquires about Bathsheba; David sends for her; David “lays with her.”

Enough concrete imagery for one Sunday? Let’s move a little toward abstraction by making just one point. To practice Pentecost today, as Spirit-led, *ruach*-enlivened followers of the living Christ, we must confess that we can be two people at once. Or to borrow a phrase from the writing of Daniel, the prophet, we all suffered from “confusion of face (9:1-8).” To practice Pentecost is to work at moving past the confusion and duplicity.

Donna Schaper, whose reflection I read this week, writes: “What we know about David later, as a man, king and leader, is that he is a man of God. What we know about him from this one story is that he is a man of lust and violence. How can the same man be both men? Those of us who know ourselves know exactly how this can be. We also have a double nature. We may be very kind outside of our homes and very unkind inside. We may be lazy at work and full of energy at home. We may have a secret habit and hope that no one ever finds out. We may pose as a man (or woman) of God but also have lust and also use violence. There are a great number of ways to be both good and bad at the same time — and most of us are both.” (*Christian Century*)

The theory is that David gets into trouble the way we get into trouble. It has to do with what she calls our “fascination with beauty.” It is an interesting diagnosis. Ok, maybe we’ve never been on a rooftop overly fascinated with something we may conspire to consume. But the idea is that we all become fascinated with that which (or whom) attracts our attention. And fascination has a

way of blurring our vision and confusing our minds. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, sure, so maybe the real insight comes when we focus on the word “fascination.” Fascination, whether it be with erotic passion (as in the case of sexual lust) or with fashion (as in *The Devil Wears Prada*) or experiencing success (once you receive a blue ribbon all other colors seem dreary) or even virtue (which can mirror our vice, which is virtue’s shadow side). Fascination needs to be carefully contained with self-control but not completely extinguished. How is fascination properly contained? By re-learning to “want what we have.” The story of David is a story about being fascinated with what we don’t have. But, you say, doesn’t life become too boring when we grow content with what we have? Perhaps. But maybe practicing Pentecost allows us to move past mere contentment with the way things are to really wanting something worth really wanting for the larger whole, the greater good, that creates new situations for others that align nicely with God’s glory and grace. To practice Pentecost is to practice containing our fascinations and to practice ongoing reinvigoration. Schaper writes: “Sometimes when you look up from your lot in life, you can tell it needs to be completely plowed up and replanted.” Is it time for you, time for me, time for us together to plow up and replant? Maybe just one little patch to start?

In her book *An Obsession With Butterflies: Our Long Love Affair With A Singular Insect*, Sharman Apt Russell writes: “A bag of goo crawls on a leaf, obsessed with eating. It hangs upside down and becomes something else. A butterfly is born, a bit of blue heaven, a jazzy design. It is a gesture of beauty almost too casual.” Practicing Pentecost after corruption. It is the work of carefully containing our fascinations and partnering with holy Spirit to reinvigorate our lives, now and again; it why we call it “practice.” And it takes practice, years of practice. Plowing up and re-planting is deliberate work. Following the Christ may seem too casual, “a gesture of beauty,” indeed. But a necessary casual, I think. Just keep remembering the butterfly.

In a collection of writings known as “The Wisdom of the Desert,” we read of a young man, “John the Dwarf.” The young monk earnestly prays for God to remove his passions. He wonders that if he were un-moved by difficulties, if he could live without feeling hatred toward those who attack him, and was un-able to be swayed by devils, he could be alive, really alive to God. So, John the Dwarf asks God to remove temptations from him. And being gracious, God answers John’s prayer and in time he ceases to feel – anything. He became passionless. In his new condition, he goes to see some older men in the desert community and tells them that he is at peace, completely. “God has removed all temptations; nothing, now, moves me,” he says. “Well,” the wise men reply, “you had better hurry back to your cell and pray that God command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battle.” As you might guess, he was surprised by this counsel, but he respects and obeys the instruction and returns to his desert hut. There he asks God for something to struggle against, for something to test him. And, gracious that God is, it is granted, and many temptations came hard and fast. But John the Dwarf never again asked for these strange companions to be removed. Though he struggled with many things, he had been enlightened. From that time on, John simply prayed: “Give me strength to get through.”

Strength to struggle with our fascinations, to plow up, replant and reinvigorate. Amen.