

July 29, 2018 - "Agents of Counter-Despair"

First, thank you Jeff for being bold enough to read this morning's first lesson

The story of Bathsheba and David is one of the best known in scripture; however I daresay it may be one of the least preached

Understandable; to say the least, it's a tough one

Most often the interpretation of this story revolves around the notion that if God would call someone like David, then there is hope for us

I don't take issue with this interpretation up until the point it minimizes or, God forbid ignores, the damage caused by David's actions

If we remove the focus from David's accountability for his sins, and its impact upon others, the sins perpetuate themselves

Speaking of such focus, in my study Bible, the heading for this story is: "David Commits Adultery with Bathsheba"

We are so good at white-washing, understating, candy-coating, relativizing, and rationalizing

Of course, David commits adultery...no brainer, but let's be real and call this what it is: this is story about rape and murder

David uses his power to overcome an innocent stranger to satisfy his lust

What makes it worse, but should come as no surprise, is that this isn't just an event, a slip, or a weak moment...it's a pattern

David is what one commenter calls a "collector of women": depending on how you count he had six or seven wives before Bathsheba, which does not take into account the many mistresses, slaves and servants who were subjected to his desires

And rape is just the first half; as we also know, attempting to cover our sins can only lead to more sins: as my father often said: "the first liar never stands a chance"

When David gets Bathsheba's tweet that she's pregnant he decides that her husband Uriah is a liability

He devises a plan for his death that is so evil that Uriah ends up delivering his own death sentence to general Joab (spoiler: any seriously devious plot demands at least one accomplice)

At the end of that day, by my count, David has trampled eight of the ten commandments into the dirt

So the real and bigger problem I'd like to talk about today is not what this means for or about David, but what it means for the people

Recall the expression: *a fish rots from the head down*

Just at the head of a creature impacts the health of the body, so too the actions of leaders affect the health of the people

When people in positions of power act rottenly, like it or not, want it or not, know it or not, we are all affected

And so there is little that is more devastating than when those in whom we place our trust transgress our and look for guidance and direction

When this happens, we project beyond the person to what they represent

A teacher's transgression is about the school and the whole educational system
 A police officer's crime is about the department and all of law enforcement
 A king's crime is about the whole political system, if not the whole nation
 A pastor's discretion is about the church – and God

And then if there is a confluence of such events, it can lead one to lose hope – we may come to believe that here are no good people anymore; that each and every system and all of its people are rotten

And, my friends, a person of faith without hope is like a fish out of water

There is a special word for this: despair, which the dictionary says is “the complete loss or absence of hope”

For Christians, despair is our kryptonite; that which robs us of all our power

Now I'd like to offer these words of deep despair from Psalm 14:

¹ Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is **no God.**’
 They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
 there is **no one** who does good.

² The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind
 to see if there are any who are wise,
 who seek after God.

³ They have **all** gone astray, they are **all** alike perverse;
 there is **no one** who does good,
no, not one.

⁴ Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
 who eat up my people as they eat bread,
 and do not call upon the Lord?

⁵ There they shall be in great terror,
 for God is with the company of the righteous.

⁶ You would confound the plans of the poor,
 but the Lord is their refuge.

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⁷ O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

This Psalm is about the perfect storm: the cynic's belief that nothing can change coupled with the despairing belief that there is no one left who can help

Can't you just hear Bathsheba sitting on her rooftop crying out:
They have **all** gone astray, they are **all** alike perverse;
there is **no one** who does good,
no, not one.

Well maybe it's not too much of a stretch

Can't you just hear yourself crying out these words while watching the nightly news?

We live in a time rife with events that lead to the temptation to despair

Every day stories of rape, murder, deceit, cover up, exposure - and so often by people in positions of power in whom we have placed our trust

How easy it would be, and how tempting it is, to give up, check out, resign, and retreat; to become cynical and lose all hope that there is anyone left who will do good

But wait, do you hear it? Do you hear the call?

No, no, no, not the cell tower on Wilmington Hospital!

I'm talking about the call from Jesus to a special mission, a call that is coming especially in these times and in this place

It's the call to be special agents: agents for counter-despair

Our special mission is to be people of hope; those who do not succumb to the cynical belief that nothing can change, and do not surrender to the lie that there is no one who does good

And God has given us all that we need:
Our badge is our Bible
Our password is Christ
Our weapon is love
And our mission is hope

But like any special agent, we must be trained

So I've come prepared this morning with the latest counter-despair methods designed to keep us from descending into the depths of despair

First: we are not to retreat, we are to advance into the world; get out, meet more people, engage in more activities for when we are out in the world we discover the goodness in the great majority of God's people

Second: fully engage in activities that offer concrete expressions of grace; give without measure and with no expectation of return

In doing so, you give the gift of hope to others, even as you receive the joy that comes with sacrificial giving

Third: give yourself permission to step back from the things that would lead you to despair, when that insatiable desire to know what is happening in the world leads you to the precipice of despair, put the newspaper down, turn off the TV, log off the computer and take a walk, call a friend, read a good novel, or take a nap

We must counter despair for ourselves no less than for others

Fourth: use everything at your disposal to share and spread hope

Use that Facebook page not to tear down and destroy, but to plant and build up; tweet stories of good news and hope; blog about the pursuit of peace and reconciliation; march with sisters and brothers for justice

Finally, when you do head out, listen for the cry "there is no one who does good" and hear it not as a rejection of hope, but as a desperate plea for the it

So now, having heard your call and having been trained and prepared, I charge you to go out into the world as an agent of counter despair:

When you hear a lie, counter it with the truth
 When you read of murder and death, counter it with healing and life
 When you witness violence, counter it with peace
 When you see hatred and oppression, counter it with love and compassion

And do all of this in the name of the One who dispels all despair and delivers all hope: Jesus, Our Christ

And I offer the final word today to Bathsheba

After bearing the first of her four sons as David's wife she served the people with integrity, compassion, and abiding love

At the end of David's life, in the evil power struggle for his successor she prevailed upon him to have her son Solomon placed on the throne

To this day the reign of Solomon is regarded as the height of the monarchy; the golden age of the people of Israel and at the center of it all was the "mother queen", presiding over it all

May God bless us with the strength, courage, and perseverance of Bathsheba as she countered her despair and lived into hope