

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

If you have been here in church any Sunday during the past eight weeks, you have heard some portion of the story of King David in the first reading from the Old Testament. It may have reminded you of your Sunday School days: how Samuel anointed the young boy David as the future king; how he slew the giant Goliath; then struggled with Saul for power; and then he became a great king.

Those are the parts we heard in Sunday School. But for the past three weeks or so, we've been hearing parts of the story they didn't let us read in Sunday School: the parts about David watching Bathsheba from his rooftop while she bathed; how he sent for her and began in illicit relationship with her; then how he ordered her husband, Uriah, into battle and arranged for him to be cut down.

No. They didn't have us read those parts in Sunday School. At least not in the Sunday School I attended! If they had, we might have taken more interest in reading the Bible! But then, those were the days when children could be protected from such stories... the days before children were exposed to so much sex and violence on TV, in the movies, and on video games that the story of David and Bathsheba would hardly get a raised eyebrow in this day and time.

But there it is, this steamy story, right in the middle of Holy Scripture, for goodness sake! It's, well, it's downright embarrassing. Good people, God's people – especially God's favored one, his golden boy, David – aren't supposed to act this way!

There's another option in the lectionary, and hearing this story for weeks now has made me wish we had chosen the other option! So how could I not talk about this? How could I not deal with what is right smack in front of us?

One of the difficulties about reading scripture is that it so easy, so tempting to take it in small, separate pieces. A book here, a line there, a portion of a story... instead of embracing it as a whole. That's natural, I suppose, given that it's written by dozens of authors over a rather vast period of time.

And we've given names to those individual works and called them "books," and we've put little numbers at the beginning of paragraphs and sentences for the sake of study and discussion. So we tend to read it in bits and pieces. Little wonder that we have some trouble seeing the big picture that is this holy writ.

Why, for instance does the canon of scripture include the book of Esther, with not one single reference to God? Why the book of Ruth, which is pretty much a story about the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law? Or the Song of Solomon, which is a love poem, no matter how some people try to make it into a metaphor for something else? I could go on and on.

But when taken as a whole, the Bible is the story of the people of God, and that includes us as inheritors of the New Covenant. When taken as a whole, the story of David falls into place and has the potential to speak to us, even now.

You see, David was the Lord's anointed one. The very name "David" means "the beloved." He was the one chosen to unite Israel and Judah into a kingdom that itself would not last, but from whose remnants would come Jesus, the Messiah for all people. David was part of God's plan, and even David's flaws and mistakes didn't change or negate that.

As important as David was in the scheme of things, you'd think that someone would have cleaned up his story for perpetuity! But no! We've got all these sordid details to deal with, for pity sake! An affair – with a pregnancy no less – an arranged murder, and a quickie marriage. That's a pretty big pile to sweep under the carpet.

Well, the word gospel means "good news." And there is more gospel in scripture than the four official gospels in the New Testament. It's gospel, good news, whenever there is a message of hope and redemption. And surely the story of David is just such a message... because David never stopped being the beloved of God.

Most certainly David had to live with the consequences of his actions. Absolution relieves us of the burden of sin, but not necessarily the burden of responsibility.

But I believe this story, with all its agonizing detail, is here for a reason. It reminds us that even when we fail, even when we make a royal mess of things, even when we forget *who* we are and *whose* we are – God never, never stops loving us.

The only unforgivable sin is the refusal to accept forgiveness! And forgiveness without reconciliation and restoration is no forgiveness at all. To be forgiven, to accept the forgiveness God has already given us, is to accept reconciliation and to be restored to fullness of life.

One of my favorite stories about forgiveness is about the long ago bishop who heard that one of the simple women who cleaned the cathedral had been heard to say that she spoke with God personally. Wanting to put an end to such arrogance and heresy, he approached her one day while she was polishing the pews.

"I understand that you claim to speak with God personally," he confronted her. "Yes, your grace," she replied. "Well, this must stop," he told her. "Yes, your grace," she replied. But later he heard that she had not stopped her claims. So he confronted her again with this challenge: "If you do indeed speak to God, then ask God what sin I committed in my youth." To which she replied, "Yes, your grace." And the bishop went away thinking that the matter was closed.

Some days later, having virtually forgotten the whole thing, he came upon her while she was working, and confidently said, "And did you ask the Almighty tell you what my sin was?" To which she said, "Yes, your grace." The bishop blanched and stammered, "Well, what did God say?" The woman looked calmly at the bishop and said, "God said... He forgets."

The good news in, under, and around the story of David is that David was the beloved; David made a mess of things; and David is still the beloved. And we are no less beloved of God than David himself. If that's not good news, then I don't know what is!