

WORSHIP SERVICE AUGUST 16, 2020

MORNING PRAYER

Caleb Yoder

God our Father,

You are the creator who is above the universe, and at the same time nearer than each breath, with a motherly love for each of your creatures.

Help us to direct our thoughts to You who are set apart from every other distraction, desire, or attachment.

In our world with so much suffering and inequality that is only underscored by the pandemic, we continue to hope in the seeds of your reign.

Our world feels wind-tossed, just like the intense winds last week in Iowa and Illinois that ruined countless acres of cropland. We pray for those who have suffered losses in this natural event, as well as loss of jobs, loss of life, loss of plans, and loss of relationship experienced during this pandemic.

We pray for governments and leaders locally, state-wide, in our nation, and throughout the world. Grant calm clarity and compassion in their decision-making and leadership. May they seek peace and the well-being of people and creation.

May your kingdom grow here on earth as it is in heaven.

Whether our lives feel good and with little stress, or whether we feel the weight of stress and grief, either way you provide our daily bread, and every resource that allows us to live each day.

We continue to pray for all students, teachers, administrators (and their families), members of Boards of Education and all who are involved with Goessel, Hesston, Newton and other schools, as we all seek to do the best we can for students in an unideal situation.

We pray for college students who as we speak are moving back to campuses and beginning a very unusual kind of school year.

We pray for those struggling with their mental health with the underlying stress of the pandemic, whether that comes in the form of low-mood or increased anxiety. While it is easy to feel isolated and alone, we share these experiences in common with others, and we share your deep and undergirding love that connects all of us whether we allow ourselves to receive it or not.

We pray for those in our church and community that carry other stress and losses. For families experiencing tension in marriages, for those who have faced changes in employment status, for

farmers weathering unfavorable economic conditions, for those feeling the disappointment of plans, milestones, and pastimes that are interrupted, for those doing OK but wondering what the next months and year will bring.

Help us to return to the basics of the gospel. In tense times, help us to recognize our shortcomings, our debts, and our sins so that we can ask for forgiveness, as we also extend forgiveness and grace to others. We share a common humanity with both our potential for good and for distraction.

Lead us away from the temptations of distraction, of negative thinking, and of siloing ourselves only with those who think the same.

Keep us from the sway of evil and make us into healing agents in our community and world, as our own healing is bound to our efforts for healing and reconciliation with others.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

REFLECTIONS ON 2 SAMUEL 11:1-27 – LUST/DISTRACTION

Lois Harder

If someone had told me two years ago that I would be installed as Alexanderwohl's Associate Pastor, outdoors on a hayrack (which has begun to feel normal) and that also I would be preaching on the topics of lust and chastity – all in the same service... well, I don't even know what my response might have been!? But certainly, there would have been some laughter! God continues to be full of surprises.

And here we are! Gathered, once again in this absolutely beautiful, God-created sanctuary. Let's not take it for granted!

Although I've read and heard the story of David and Bathsheba many times and, as Caleb said, "This is the quintessential Biblical example of lust.", I still wanted to read it and understand it again in its context – so important for every Biblical story. So, I went back and brushed up a bit on the stories of David – with the aim of this story being the focus. Here's some of what I learned and re-learned, in a nutshell.

David started out as a simple shepherd; the youngest, the smallest, the least significant, the one no one even noticed or remembered. He had no power, no status and no wealth. But what David DID have going for him was his faithfulness, his obedience to God, his willingness and eagerness to "inquire of the Lord" before he acted. He was loyal to God and to the people God put in his path. He played music to soothe Saul's tormented soul and was nearly broken by the news of his soul-mate Jonathan's death. He was willing to make a complete fool of himself as he worshipped and praised God and danced the ark of the covenant to its rightful place in Jerusalem and he had

great compassion for the crippled Mephibosheth. As we read David's story from our 21st century perspective, it seems that his faithfulness also led him to carry out many heinous acts of violence, murder and warfare. He led many armies against many other armies. He ordered what we might call terrorist acts of torture and killing. But by the ways the story is written, the details of David's prayers, meditation, his "inquiring of the Lord" for instructions, his willingness to listen to Nathan, the prophet and advisor, it's clear that the writer wants the reader to understand that David was deeply faithful, he feared the Lord God, he honored the covenant that God had made – and God honored him.

By the time we get to the Bathsheba story in chapter 11 of 2 Samuel, David has gone from what we might call, "rags to riches". He's a powerful, wealthy king, feared and respected by his own people and the peoples around them. He's come a looonnnnggggg way from his humble beginnings but he's still faithful – and God, the writer tells us, continues to be faithful to David.

At the beginning of this story, though, we don't read anything about David praying, meditating or inquiring of the Lord. It simply says, "It happened, late one afternoon...David rose from his couch, he saw from the roof, the woman was beautiful", and rather than inquire of the Lord, he inquired about the woman. And the story goes downhill for David from there. He lusted after Bathsheba's physical beauty. And the description of the damage that was done in those moments of thoughtless, unfocused, selfish behavior only takes three verses! After reading many chapters and stories of David's faithfulness previous to this, we read, "David sent someone to find out who this woman was – oh! She was someone's daughter and someone else's wife! Doesn't matter! David sent messengers to get her, they brought her, he laid with her, she went back to her house, conceived and was pregnant." It's the description of a remarkably mechanical, stark, emotionless, thoughtless act.

It's as if the writer wants us readers to really feel that punch in the gut, to understand what happens when we humans – even momentarily – let down our guard, let our attention stray, when we give in to our temptations, forget (just for a minute!) who we are and lose our focus on God. It can be disastrous. It can take a whole lifetime of faithful, covenant-honoring, wise and humble leadership and in three verses, do serious, long-term, damage.

As we know, David paid a very high price for his lust, his momentary distraction. He received a scathing condemnation from Nathan, his trusted advisor, he and Bathsheba suffered the death of their ill-created child, although David begged God for the child's life. And in just one verse we read that Bathsheba was left to grieve the death of her husband, Uriah. She and David had another son, Solomon who ascended to the throne years later.

In spite of David's lapse in judgment, his loss of focus and his colossal mess-up, God's steadfast love and mercy are greater! David continued on as king and was granted many more years of faithful, powerful leadership for the people of Israel.

The practice suggested for today's service comes from the Ignatian tradition of prayers of consolation and prayers of desolation, or it's sometimes also called the prayer of examen. Briefly described these are prayers that can be offered at the end of a given period of time – for instance,

they're often practiced during the season of Lent. But it can also be done at the end of something (anything) as a way of thoughtfully reflecting and meditating on that time or event. For instance, it can be done at the end of a season like now... at the end of the summer, to think about what that season offered that you're grateful for... rest, rejuvenation, thoughts and dreams for a new school year. As well as the things about that season that you're glad to be leaving behind, the things that might have led you away from God or that simply weren't helpful... anxiety, longing for control over plans that didn't materialize, immobilizing fear. The prayer of examen is an opportunity to reflect, give thanks and give back. It can be done at the end of a year or a month or a week. When my daughters were young, we often practiced prayers of examen at the end of each day – they were part of our bedtime prayers. So, since that's what I'm most familiar with, I'd like to invite you to join me for this practice. With my girls, the prayers went something like this:

As we settle into our beds, dear God, we think about the beauty of the day we've just lived. I think of two or three things about today that I am especially grateful for, moments in the day when I felt close to you, God. (Take a couple of minutes now to identify those two or three things for which you're grateful – times when you felt God's nearness.) And now, God I think of two or three moments or times in my day that I'd like to give back to you – times when I felt far away from you or things were frustrating, things that might keep me from sleeping. These are the things I'd like for you to take from me, God, the parts of my day that I don't need or want to hang onto because they might distract me from following you.

[Prayer of Confession and Words of Assurance in the bulletin]

JOHN 8:2-14 – CHASTITY/FOCUS

Step by Step

In this story we find the religious leaders itching for a fight and trying their darndest to spring a trap on Jesus. They were clearly desperate in this situation because given the fact that scribes and Pharisees were practitioners of the religious law, these fellows were incredibly sloppy and careless and blatantly manipulative as they twisted and bent the Mosaic laws in ways they knew the laws were never intended to be used. First of all, they brought no witnesses to bear on the accusation that the woman had been caught "in the act of adultery". No judge was expected to offer adjudication of this sort without witnesses. Seems like that could have been kind of dicey, but maybe that was the point! Second, they implied that the death penalty would only be for the woman. They knew good and well that adultery was punishable by death to both the woman and the man and that, in fact, the man was more culpable when adultery was concerned because he was to see to the protection and stability of his property – namely the women and children of his household. Verse 6 leaves us with no doubt about the motives of these big shots. They were trying to fabricate charges against Jesus.

So why, I asked myself, was this story suggested for use in a service about lust and chastity? Here's what I came to. This story, not so different than the story about David, can be understood

as a story about the lust for power. These cats were very angry and threatened by Jesus' messages of freedom for the prisoners, the last being first and the first being last, the poor and humble being lifted up and the powerful being brought low, the hungry being fed and the rich being sent away empty. They were on the wrong side of all of those scenarios. And Jesus, of course, gives a classic and timeless response, an example we can all follow, if we can think quickly and clearly enough to do it. Jesus could see right through their ridiculous charade. And he was not one bit interested or willing to engage with them. So, he dismissed them without ever speaking a word. He stalled. He ignored. The text says he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. The commentaries say that "in the Mediterranean world of Jesus' time, such an act would have been recognized as an act of refusal and disengagement." Then... the only words he spoke to them were words of confrontative challenge. "Sure – go ahead and whip those rocks at her... whichever of you yahoos have never messed up. Go ahead." Boom! He leveled the playing field, letting them know that their judgmental accusations were like boomerangs, coming right back to them. There's plenty of sin to go around here. And there's also plenty of grace and mercy, for anyone who will repent, re-focus, honor and embrace God's loving covenant.

Jesus' message was crystal-clear with just a few, well-placed words. Not only was he letting them know that he saw through them and would not engage their fake questions, he also bought himself some time. Time to breathe, to focus, to re-gain his equilibrium, to re-connect to God, his source, in those brief seconds of kneeling down. I'm not sure that "chastity" is exactly the right word for what I'm describing, but it's the idea of being focused, attentive, of keeping our commitments and our goals clearly in view, of doing what it takes to stay on track to follow Jesus directly, closely. In this story Jesus actually used this tactic two times – right in a row! It seems like a tool we should have in our discipleship tool belt. After he assures the woman that she's released from her prison of shame and given another chance, he goes on to declare himself the light of the world! Again, these religious politicians who were always vying and jockeying for their positions of wealth and power go on the attack, tossing out more lame and meaningless accusations. Jesus replies calmly that he knows where he has come from and where he is going; they, on the other hand, the ones who claim to know and really *should* know, have no idea where he has come from or where he is going. They don't know him at all.

As we head into another week, I pray that we might be vigilant and attentive – to make sure that our own lust for power and wealth and status doesn't entrap us and make us unable to see our own weakness and vulnerability. I pray that we might use the prayer of examen and also learn from Jesus' example of how to stay focused and connected to God, our source. Amen.

I thank Braden and Jill for bringing us this special song this morning. I believe this is Braden's own arrangement of this beautiful tune. With their permission, I'd like to just read through the words before they sing so that, hopefully, you can really listen and let this be our closing prayer:

Eternal light shine in my heart; eternal hope, lift up my eyes; eternal power, be my support; eternal wisdom, make me wise.

Eternal life, raise me from death; eternal brightness, make me see; eternal spirit, give me breath;
eternal Savior, come to me.

Until by your most costly grace, invited by your holy word, at last I come before your face, to
know you, my eternal God.