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What We Do with Red Hot Loneliness

2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

The trouble starts, at least in my opinion...the trouble in today's story begins when David refuses to deal with his red hot loneliness. He ought to be out waging battle, viewing his kingdom, meeting with his people, but, inexplicably, he isn't. He's lethargic, even lazy, and lonely. And, of course, the even bigger problem, is that that is not where this story ends - not with his red hot loneliness, but with all the ways he abuses other people to soothe himself. Loneliness is a fact of life on earth. We will all be lonely - we all have

been lonely - in our lives. The past year or more has been incredibly lonely. We have literally been isolated in our homes. It has been bad enough that even introverts like me have been lonely! We cannot escape the fact of loneliness, but if we are willing to lean into our loneliness, we will see God's grace at work, because the Good News isn't that we can achieve pain-free living; the Good News is that God's grace transforms our pain and loneliness into courage, compassion, wisdom, and resiliency.

The story my Bible so benignly calls "David and Bathsheba" deserves a great deal of candor. History has long condemned Bathsheba, bringing charges of temptress and adulteress, but we can and should acquit her. Professor of Old Testament Wil Gafney points out that the text condemns David alone for the crimes he commits. David rapes a woman and murders her husband to cover up his indiscretion. David, a known womanizer with seven wives already and cultural access to many slaves and concubines, takes the wife of someone else. David has sent his troops and commanders off to battle - he should be there with them - and instead he is home, alone. Alone with his thoughts, his past traumas, his failures, even his successes that have come at a high price. David has achieved everything he set out to do: he has conquered, ascended to the throne, produced heirs, and accumulated wealth. But you can have it all and still be incredibly lonely. You can have it all, and still be in pain. You can have it all, and, when you're alone, still have to take stock. So, David is alone and it hurts.

Whether we want to admit it or not, it can be hard to be alone. Even when we're in a crowd. When we talk about being alone, we really mean those times when the little voice of self-doubt gets a megaphone and lets us know what everyone else "thinks" of us. And we mean those times when something big has happened in our lives - the death of a spouse or parent, loosing our job, getting a diagnosis that requires us to spend lots of time waiting on the cheap plastic furniture of one doctor's office after another. And when we talk about being alone, we mean those times when we have interior work to do. When we've failed, or even when we've achieved our greatest success. Being alone at those times can be painful, isolating, torturous. And all of us had tried to relieve the pain in regretful ways: sinking into our glowing rectangles and ignoring responsibilities, yelling and snapping at those around us, and, sometimes, something even more regrettable. And that's what David does: he relieves his pain by abusing another human being. Actually, he abuses a great many people, who must cover for the king's indiscretion. And that indiscretion turns into so much more - an unwanted pregnancy, a murder. The trouble starts with red hot loneliness, and when David doesn't transform that loneliness, then he hurts other people.

It is like Richard Rohr always says, "If we do not transform our pain, we will always transmit it." The consequences of David's sin are dire. The baby Bathsheba bears died, which, I have to be honest, is a very difficult punishment for me to reconcile. But I don't think the story ends there. David's behavior has far-reaching consequences. When the camera pans away from the drama with Bathsheba, it will turn to David's son Amnon, who rapes his brother's wife in a plot perfectly parallel to what David does to Bathsheba.

By the end of David's life, his sons attempt to usurp power from the aging king. His dynasty of four centuries will be a divided one, marked by kings who walk with God and a great many more who use and abuse their power. Scripture loves to say that some of these kings walk in the way of their father, David, but I find myself wondering if the label was applied to the right ones. If you do not transform your pain, you will transmit it.

David's story is an old one. It is a story about pain, and how we as people, when we are uncomfortable, look for the easy way out. The quick fix. We hate to be lonely. Researchers from the University of Virginia and Harvard published a study in *Science Magazine* which found that people did not enjoy being left alone for a mere 15 minutes with nothing but their own thoughts. In fact, in a subsequent study, they gave participants a mild electronic shock. Then they asked participants if they would pay to avoid being shocked again, and nearly all of the participants said they would pay money to avoid being shocked, but when those same people were left alone for fifteen minutes, over half of them chose to self-administer a shock than be lonely. We are so afraid of being alone with ourselves that we are willing to do just about anything to relieve that red, hot loneliness. Glennon Doyle, in her book *Love Warrior*, talks about trying to push the easy button - how everything around us tells us the lie that we are supposed to be happy all the time, and offers us all these outs - toys, clothes, looks, food, booze, using other people. But that's not the truth. Doyle writes, "Finally, I was being quiet and still enough to hear the truth: You are not supposed to be happy all the time. Life hurts and it's hard. Not because you're doing it wrong, but because it hurts for everybody. Don't avoid the pain. You need it. It's meant for you. Be still with it, let it come, let it go, let it leave you with the fuel you'll burn to get your work done on this earth." The Good News about loneliness is that, by the grace of God, it can be transformed into courage and compassion and wisdom and resiliency.

David transmitted his pain. But this story is not just about David. After everything that happens to her - the rape, the murder of her husband, being forced to marry her rapist and bear his child - after all that, Bathsheba has another son by David. And she will do everything she can for her son. She raises him into a man known for his wisdom and, when Solomon finally surpasses his many big brothers and ascends to the throne, the prophet Nathan installs her as the Queen Mother, an official position advising the king. And her name is among mere 9% of personal names in the Bible that belong to women. God can transform our red hot loneliness into wisdom, compassion, courage, and resiliency.

God is in the transforming business. Look, we're so used to pushing the easy button - using and abusing others and ourselves rather than sit with our pain and loneliness. Pushing the easy button when we're in pain is the essential plot line of everything on prime time television and most movies. The reality is, learning to sit with our red hot loneliness—learning to befriend it, well, that isn't terribly exciting. Getting sober, being faithful to your spouse, making sense of tragedy. It is generally interior work, and it isn't terrible exciting, and it can be painful and arduous. But it is holy work. It is *our* work.

And it is the work God is doing in and through us in order to form us into a wise, courageous, resilient people.

Amen.