

July 25, 2021
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 11), Year B
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

When I was a child, television was simple. I grew up in Baton Rouge. It was a big city, but it had only two TV stations: CBS and NBC. They shut down from midnight to six a.m. Baton Rouge got public television in 1975—I was 13—and ABC in 1977—I was 15. Incidentally, BetaMax came out in 1975 and VCR in 1977, but they were very expensive at first, so it would be a long while before they entered my home. Eventually the glory of cable TV arrived. I think I was in college. Until then, the family TV set was wired to an outdoor aerial antenna. My father mounted the antenna atop a steel pole. The pole reached to the ground and was loosely bracketed to the edge of the roof. This high-tech installation made it easy to adjust the direction of the antenna to fine-tune the reception. All you had to do was pop outside and rotate the pole.

This high-tech installation also gave us the option to point the antenna in roughly the opposite direction and pick up one station broadcasting from New Orleans. Well, we could sort of pick it up. When I was in elementary school and my two sisters and I were desperate for entertainment, we would give it a try. Because I was the youngest, I was usually the one designated to go outside and turn the pole. I would turn the antenna roughly toward New Orleans, and then toggle it back and forth while a sister inside shouted directions: “Keep going! Go back! Too far! STOP!”

The quality of the reception was better at night, but it was never good. Sometimes the sound was okay, but the picture was always awful. All we could see were shadowy figures against an indistinguishable background. As we watched, we would lean forward and squint, just like I do now when driving through a heavy snowstorm. That’s pretty much what it looked like. The first challenge was determining just what it was that we were watching. This was followed by a running stream of conversation while together we deciphered the action. “Who said that?” “What did they just do?”

I don’t think we ever watched a whole show. After ten or fifteen minutes, we’d tire of trying to figure it out and wander off to find something better to do. If it was daytime, I might go back outside, shinny right up that aerial pole, and sit on the roof. The pole was in front of the house, attached to the roof over the carport. I’d climb up, sit on the edge, dangle my legs over the side, and take in the neighborhood. I’d stay up there for a long time. Sometimes I’d walk around up on the roof. I’m pretty sure I was doing that by age six.

Can you imagine? I can only say that life back then was different in very many ways. Take, for instance, television programming. In television programming back then, there were good guys and there were bad guys. The stars of the show were always good guys. It was easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys. From TV lawyers to TV doctors to TV cops, the good guys were always *very* good, and they always prevailed in the end. The bad guys were always *very* bad, and they always paid in the end.

Nowadays, it's not usually that simple. Instead, we see TV characters who are much more complicated than simply *good* or *bad*. We see TV series in which the star is arguably more bad than good, is less hero than anti-hero. I don't know which character or show this started with. An early entry was Tony Soprano and *The Sopranos*. Many characters and series have followed.

I haven't actually watched many of them. Typically, I watch a few episodes and I just can't take it. But I have watched every episode of *Rev*. *Rev* is a British series from the early 2010s about the priest of an Anglican church in inner-city London. The Rev. Adam Smallbone is a basically good guy who can't stop himself from doing things that get him in trouble. I found myself saying to the TV almost every episode, "Adam, don't do it! NO, DON'T DO IT!" But he goes ahead and does it anyway. I think the word we now use to describe this is *cringeworthy*. I learned about *Rev* from the priest who was my mentor for ordination. *Rev* extended only for three six-episode seasons. I was sad there wasn't more, but kind of glad, too. It struck too close to home.

Back to the point: today television gives us characters who are mixtures of both good and bad, characters who are flawed and complicated. They surprise us in ways that please us, and in ways that disappoint us. This may be a relatively recent trend on television, but it has nothing on the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with people of uncertain competency and questionable character. It started early on in Genesis, when Cain killed Able in a fit of jealousy. Abraham banished Hagar and his own firstborn child. The ambitious Jacob tricked the impetuous Esau into giving away his birthright in exchange for supper.

All this summer, our Hebrew Scripture readings have been about Saul and David. We began on the Sunday after Trinity Sunday, hearing that God didn't want the people to have a king, warning them about abuse of royal power, but the people made Saul king anyway. Eventually Saul yielded to David. Now, here we are. David is at both the pinnacle of his power and the depth of his depravity. Talk about cringeworthy.

For me, each week over these many weeks, hovering in the background of every story told, was the story we finally got to today, the story of David and Bathsheba and Uriah. David commits sexual assault and adultery. To cover up Bathsheba's pregnancy, David essentially murders Uriah. Of course this year is not the first time I've heard these stories. But this year I'm hearing them with a stronger sense of imperative. That's perhaps because I'm hearing them in the continuingly long shadow of a recent ex-President of the United States, and that's because some evangelical Christian leaders have compared him to King David. David wasn't perfect, they said, and still God worked through him.

That's not why I would compare this ex-President to King David, but I have to concede that point. They're right, of course, in that there is no person who is perfect. God *does* have the power to work in and through every person, no matter how imperfect they might be. But they might also remember this: David will pay dearly for his transgression with Bathsheba and Uriah. For David, it's all pretty much downhill from here. Still, David was one of the most important figures in Hebrew history. Of course the messiah must be descended from him.

Speaking of that messiah, today's Gospel reading gives two miracles, one for the masses, and one for the select. Remember, all four gospels include the story of the miraculous feeding; Matthew and Mark even tell it twice. Matthew, Mark, and John include the story of the storm, in each case following the miraculous feeding. In other words, the miraculous feeding was important, and usually linked with the storm. Experts will say that these stories demonstrate the power of Jesus over both the mundane and the cosmic, both the individual and the universal. None of the five thousand who were fed was perfect; Jesus fed them anyway. None of the disciples was perfect; Jesus saved them anyway. He needed them to keep feeding the multitudes and stilling the storms.

Even though I cringe when I hear it, I'm mostly grateful to have the full truth of the story of David. I think complicated stories help us to digest the complicated realities of our own lives. Back in the 1970s, we began coming out of a very long stretch of American history in which a lot of things were hidden or whitewashed, a time when it was all too easy to turn away from the truth. The blend of good and bad, the anti-hero instead of the hero: these are things we live with every day. Most of us even occupy contexts in which we personally know the risk of privilege and the temptation of power.

I hope we climb to the roof, not to glimpse the people over whom we have power, but instead to turn our antennas toward the Holy. We need the best signal we can get. For me, there seemed to be a lot of static during the pandemic. The signal improved as the pandemic improved. I think I even started to pick up some personal beeps, as lately I have found myself doing some intentional fine-tuning so that I can hear the signal more clearly. Maybe it's a post-pandemic thing, but I'm going with it, and I hope it continues. I also hope some beeps come your way, and I hope you have space to really listen.