

A Righteous Life: Ingesting the Manna from Heaven – Mikey Ward

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

Today's passages center on the question of what it means for us to be righteous in the already, but not yet Kingdom of our Triune God. What does it mean to be righteous? How are we to be righteous when we may feel the opposite? How does one go about being considered righteous? And at what point does one go from choosing a righteous act to being described as a righteous person? How does one embody righteousness? In the Old Testament passage, we see the righteous man being put to death. In the Psalter, we see the consequences of or the absence of righteousness. In the Epistle reading, we are given a prayer that reveals that the righteous lifestyle is one where our body is married to and interacts with our Triune God. And finally, in the gospel reading today we see that righteousness for God the Son is miraculous and embodied by living under the authority and righteous lineage set forth by God the Father.

This is to say that our lectionary readings demonstrate how truly difficult it is to live a righteous life. It necessitates solitude. It necessitates prayer. It necessitates a community of vulnerable and forgiving believers who unfathomably believe in a wondrous and miraculous God. It necessitates that we question our own actions as well as one another's actions through love. And it necessitates that we be willing to ask, "Whose authority are we functioning under?" It necessitates a willingness to speak truth to power despite consequences—even unto death. It necessitates the gathering, giving thanks, and breaking of bread not of this world. Consequently, it necessitates a faith in a Kingdom bigger and better than comprehension. A faith that fully believes in miracles. Miracles where 5,000 men plus women and children are fed by the Bread of Heaven. Miracles where a murderer and adulterer is still held as a beloved in the eyes of our Lord. Thus, as we turn to the details and nitty gritty realities of today's lectionary passages, let us focus in on the question, "What does a righteous life look like? Under whose authority does a righteous Christ-follower act?" And when we transition to sharing a miraculous meal together, may we remind ourselves of how beyond comprehension, miraculous, and truly transformative the invitation to share a meal in the Kingdom of God truly is. And with this, may we turn to one another in our community of believers and ask, "How we can live into this Kingdom more fully as well as live less in the self-made kingdoms of man?"

That being said, this question of how to live a righteous life in and under the authority of the Kingdom of God is deeply challenged and opposed when we are faced with our passage from 2 Samuel. Last week, we read of Nathan's prophecy of the house of David. Today, we see the fulfillment of this prophecy. David, a man after God's own heart "usurps the role of Yahweh, by providing violently, for himself. The stench of corruption (and sin) cleaves to him."¹ His sins as an Israelite king in this passage alone are, but are not limited to: forcing Joab to carry out his role in war and abandoning his soldiers; watching Bathsheba taking a bath (lustfulness); utilizing his power to put a woman—whom he is supposed to protect as king—in a vulnerable state by summoning her to his palace; coercively committing adultery; expecting Bathsheba to cover his adultery with Uriah's granted break from war; plotting to cover his adultery by getting Uriah to lay at the feet of Bathsheba, and in doing so, requesting a soldier to sin against the Deuteronomic

¹ Halpern, Baruch. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*, 36.

laws; utilizing alcohol in attempts to provoke Uriah to act sinfully; when denied, plotting to kill Uriah in battle; giving Uriah his death sentence to deliver to Joab; forcing Joab to carry out the murder of multiple faithful subordinates in a way that Uriah's murder is described as an inevitable "accident of war"²; and finally, claiming Bathsheba as his wife. David, the king and best man that Israel can produce, has committed a multitude of severe and unfathomable sins. The following passage tells us that Yahweh is furious. Nathan, Yahweh's prophet, confronts and pronounces Yahweh's judgment unto David: the son of David's adultery is to die. David is remorseful and cries out to Yahweh, but only after Nathan likens his actions to that of a man who has stolen another's livestock. What a tragedy.

In the day and age of the #MeToo movement, it is beyond difficult to see how David could be a righteous man. Moreover, if 1 and 2 Samuel were written for his son Solomon, and seek to defend David as a hero against his enemies, why is this narrative included? In it, David, the supposed Second Adam, is utilizing his own power and authority to rape and kill the innocent and righteous people of God. Granted, many scholars dispute this by stating that Bathsheba consensually entered into a relationship with David. This is both a reasonable and an unreasonable interpretation. It is reasonable because there is a lot of mystery left for the readers to interpret regarding what is truly Bathsheba's role in this narrative. It is unreasonable because it forces one to participate in what sexual assault researchers call cognitive distortions: the convincing of self that a false notion is true.³ That is to say, there is little to no evidence that Bathsheba is acting sinfully in this narrative. There is no indication that Bathsheba was acting improperly or outside ancient customs when bathing outside. There is no indication that Bathsheba partook in this narrative beyond powerlessly succumbing to the commands and power of King David. There is, however, ample evidence within the surrounding passages that women—especially Bathsheba—are viewed in a demeaning and dehumanizing manner. In fact, only when Nathan tells David his sins through a story that likens women to livestock does David comprehend the severity of his sins and repent. Additionally, throughout this passage, the actions and expectations placed upon Bathsheba reveal larger and more problematic cultural expectations for women.

This is to say that, in the era of the #MeToo movement, we ought to be quick to discern how arguments placing blame onto Bathsheba for provocatively bathing in close proximity to the royal palace have shallow understandings of ancient customs and participate in victim blaming. Furthermore, arguments that attempt to lessen David's actions by arguing that Bathsheba consensually entered into an adulterous relationship with David, because the narrative does not include a protest by Bathsheba (like Tamar's in chapter 13), demonstrate a shallow and distorted understanding of consent, power dynamics, how no one assault is like another, and many other innumerable horrors of sexual violence. That being said, it is understandable that one would attempt to lessen the horror of King David's actions. However, the larger church tradition does not dismiss David. In fact, John Chrysostom states that King David is acting with "drunkenness of the soul."⁴ Today, may I suggest that we turn from attempts to rationalize King David's actions because it got us here as a church—where a social movement once more is teaching us how miraculous growth and healing can only come when sins are revealed, punishment is given,

² Halpern, Baruch. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*, 37.

³ Elaina Dockterman. *Inside Sex Offender Therapy in Time Magazine*, May 21, 2018, 43.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily VII in Against the Jews*.

victims are truly supported, and we actively trust and hope in a righteousness that surpasses our comprehension and allows opportunities of reconciliation.

Additionally, it is reasonable to believe that this narrative would not have been included if it did not lead to the killing of Uriah the Hittite or the tragic birth of King Solomon. In fact, both Bathsheba and Joab are represented as passive characters. This is because David functions as though he has all the power within their relationships. As stated previously, he has usurped Yahweh. He commands the actions of both Bathsheba and Joab. Thus, in a sense, there are only two actors in this narrative—David and Uriah. While one functions in power and usurps the role of Yahweh, the other functions in faithfulness and righteousness. This is emphasized in verse 11 when Uriah the Hittite tells King David that he will not do what he has commanded, but rather what is righteous of an Israelite soldier. The irony here is tragic. When faithfulness and righteousness clash with power, however, power prevails.⁵ Nonetheless, Uriah, and not King David, demonstrates to us today what is expected of a righteous life—faithfulness unto death. However, the fact that David feels obligated to cover up the way he conducts himself with Bathsheba tells us something about Israel’s laws and standards. Although he demonstrates the terrors and horrors that come with unquestioned power, David ultimately also demonstrates that no human is above the law of God. This reality is furthered in today’s Psalter reading and throughout the remainder of 2 Samuel. In today’s Psalter, we are introduced to the fruits of one who lives as if they are above the laws of God. According to Walter Brueggemann, the intent of Psalm 14 is “to counter the temptation that humankind can manage the world in ways better than Yahweh’s way.”⁶

Juxtaposed with our reading from 2 Samuel, the Psalter functions as an indictment against David. It is easy to see how David functions as the *fool* in verse one who does not visibly denounce God, but rather does *in his heart* because “he thinks and decides that way.”⁷ This is to say that David’s actions in 2 Samuel demonstrate a disordered life because it is not referred to God. “The result of such mistaken autonomy,” Brueggemann argues, “is the assumption that life is normless. Where God is not, everything is possible. The outcome is that the action of such a person is corrupt, without good (v. 1), without discernment, and therefore exploitative of other people (v. 4)...The end result is a life filled with terror (v. 5a). There are no guards, limits, or boundaries, but everything is continually at risk. A person who follows that way has no supports for life beyond his own hopeless efforts, and those efforts are inevitably inadequate.”⁸ We see this in its entirety throughout our reading from 2 Samuel.

However, Psalm 14 offers an additional and significant counter theme: this is still God’s world. As a result, it is a world where the innocent can take refuge and can be protected (v. 6) as well as a world in which that a human life referred to God is “still possible and worth living.”⁹ Which leads us back to the question: why did the author of 1 and 2 Samuel so openly undermine the greatest king in Israelite history and include this narrative?

⁵ David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel*, 206.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, 45.

⁷ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ Brueggemann, 44.

Two reasons, I believe. First, to demonstrate that this world is ultimately God's Kingdom and that no man is above God's sovereignty—even, and especially, the greatest Israelite king. Secondly, that God's law is rooted in a divine grace that transcends human comprehension. Thus, I believe we can glean three lessons from our Old Testament and Psalter readings this morning. First, Uriah demonstrates to us the consequences of living a righteous life: death. Second, David reveals the tragic terrorism made manifest when one usurps the role of Yahweh in their life. And third, the story of David reveals that God does not exclude David (or anyone) from the opportunity to live a righteous life. Needless to say, what incomprehensible faith is this? Does a righteous life truly place its trust in such a faith? Indeed, yes. Thus, we must ask ourselves, when we attempt to rationalize away and diminish David's sins in 2 Samuel 11 as adultery and not also rape, do we not also attempt to limit the wondrous and miraculous faith in our God, where justice includes not only punishment for assailants, but also incomprehensible opportunities for reconciliation?

Our gospel reading this morning emphatically says yes to these questions. Even more so, we can also see the lessons gleaned from our Old Testament readings at work within John 6. First, we know that like Uriah, Jesus will die as a result of his righteous commitment to God the Father. We can see this if we turn to the passage preceding today's reading. Christ's commitment to God the Father is considered blasphemous in John 5 because he is *making himself equal with God*. However, we know that Christ, God the Son, is functioning in righteousness and within the authority of God the Father through the Holy Spirit. Second, in the preceding passage, Jesus calls out those who question his authority for not living with God the Father in their hearts. Jesus states: *But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?* Here, although the Israelites in his midst are stating that Jesus is blasphemous because he is *making himself equal with God*, he reveals that they are in fact the blasphemous ones who are doomed for judgment if they do not turn to live with God in their heart. Third, however, we know that God's grace is not exclusive to those who live with God in their heart. John 6 demonstrates how truly miraculous this reality is when Jesus takes five loaves, gives thanks to God the Father, distributes the loaves until the five thousand plus are satisfied and the remains are enough to fill twelve baskets. However, our gospel reading is not completed at the conclusion of this miracle. No, we do not get one miracle story, but two: the feeding of the five thousand as well as Jesus walking on water.

Prior to both miracles, however, we see Jesus going up the mountain. Once, to be with his disciples and the other, to be alone—presumably to be with God the Father. In each, we see Jesus' actions to be reminiscent of Moses when he ascends Mt. Sinai to be in the presence of God. This, I believe is for three reasons: to indicate to the Israelites that Jesus is functioning in like manner to Moses in the wilderness, to indicate to the readers Jesus' place within the hierarchy of the cosmos, and as stated in John 5, to indicate that Jesus is not functioning within his own authority alone, but rather along with God the Father. This notion furthered in verse 15, when Jesus realizes that the crowd is going to force him to be king and he withdraws up the mountain by himself. This is significant because it was considered dangerous in the ancient world to ascend a mount by oneself. In doing so and by descending unharmed, Jesus indicates his hierarchy within the cosmos as well as revealing that his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus'

place within the cosmos is furthered in verses 16 to 21 when he walks not on still water, but the treacherous waves of the sea. “Given the structures of the boats of this period, people (i.e. many of his disciples) who traveled over or worked on the sea literally put their lives in the hands of the spirits or deity that revealed its moods in the varying movements of the sea.”¹⁰

Nonetheless, the question remains: why are these miracles necessary? Why couldn't Jesus make a speech requesting that the five thousand share their resources? Why couldn't Jesus wait for a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee? Why must Jesus transform five loaves and two fish into an abundant meal for 5,000 (plus women and children) and walk on water? In today's reading, we are given a multitude of crumb-sized indications by John. When, gathered, these crumbs comprise an eternal loaf to reveal the manna from heaven.

In verse four, John signposts to his readers that Passover is near and that the multitudes are uncommonly having a meal out on a mount. This is significant because it not only foreshadows the Last Supper, but also demonstrates the nature of Christ's kingdom—one where ritual purity is not necessary for heavenly manna. In verse 9, John indicates that the loaves of bread are made of barley. This is significant because it harkens us back to Elisha's miraculous feeding of 100 in 2 Kings, but also to the reality that barley loaves were considered less than and designated for the poor and slaves of society. This is indicative of the nature of Christ's kingdom, a kingdom where the innocent and vulnerable are provided for and protected through surprising and miraculous means. In verse 11, Jesus takes the five loaves and gives thanks. This is significant because the word for the phrase *given thanks* is the word used for Eucharist, or The Lord's Supper. Verses 12 through 15 reveal the evidence that this truly is a miraculous meal, one where all have their fill and twelve baskets of loaves are collected full. Those in attendance—and those of us here who bake bread—know that there is a great deal of labor that goes into one loaf of bread, let alone twelve baskets. Thus, when Jesus provides this manna from heaven he not only indicates that his Kingdom will provide for the innocent and marginalized, but it will also be provided for eternity. This is to say that this miraculous meal in John 6 is life-giving and necessary because it provides needed sustenance as well as indicating the salvation provided in the kingdom of God. Therefore, in a moment, when we transition to the sharing of a meal together may we use this miraculous story as our lens, and seek to see how truly miraculous, transformative, and salvific it is to partake in the eating and drinking of this, the manna from heaven. Moreover, may we give thanks!

If we do so, we will partake in a miraculous meal where we ingest a meal that actively partakes in restoration for the most deplorable actions and people to be made new in the eyes of our Beloved. A miraculous meal where we hope and pray for the innocent and victimized of the world to be made aware of the protective and eternal kingdom of God. A miraculous meal where we are asked to live not under our own authority or another's in this life, but rather the authority of our Triune God. A miraculous meal where we are invited to have Christ dwell in our hearts, to be strengthened through the Holy Spirit, and to be filled with the fullness of God. May we not minimize or rationalize this miraculous meal. A miraculous meal where we come asking how to live a righteous life and leave having taken in the means to this mystifying question.

¹⁰ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 128.

In closing, may we celebrate all of these miraculous realities and be made new. Let us partake, and ingest what it means to live a righteous life in the Kingdom of God. Let us in turn leave knowing a righteous life seeks to live under the authority of our Triune God. Today's readings teach us that such a life protects the innocent, provides for the victims of this world, speaks truth to power, calls assailants to punishment as well as restoration, provides meals to the undeserving, and chooses what is ordained by God—even unto death. If we do so, our communal meal together today will truly be of miraculous manna in the already, but not yet.

Therefore, I would like to close by communally turning to St. Paul's prayer in our Epistle reading for today. It is a prayer for readers who earnestly believe in the transformative power of the Christian faith. If you are able and willing, I invite you to kneel. Let us pray in union together: *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*