July 26, 2009
Sermon, FoH
Year B, 2 Samuel, John 6

King David, as we know, was the beloved king of Israel—loved loved by God and loved by the people. We love David for the psalms he wrote, that we continue to read and claim as our own expressions of worship and praise, of joy and lament. But then. Then there's this story of David and Bathsheba. This ugly story. This face of David that is hard for us to look at. So troubling that we want to make him look better. So we paint Bathsheba as the seductress. I was looking at paintings of this story: nearly all of them were paintings of a sultry Bathsheba, an agent of seduction, shifting the blame and responsibility away from God's anointed king. David didn't seem to capture much artistic imagination, which I completely understand. David's behavior is too much like our own behavior—we don't have to imagine it, much less paint it. We want to avoid it. Pretend it doesn't exist. But is there more to this story than the ugliness of David's sin? The ugliness of our sin?

As I looked at and listened to these Texts over the past weeks, I began to see images of two contrasting kingdoms, David's kingdom and the Kingdom of God. These two kingdoms are distinct images, with distinct palettes, textures, and contrasts. The Story of God's people has always been a story about a people set apart, a people in exile, a people in between an earthly kingdom and the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus announced and showed us what it looks like to live in God's Kingdom. John's account of the Feeding of the 5,000 is an amazing and beautiful contrast to the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah. If we look at it, we can see its Eternal Wisdom, as useful for us as it was for the multitude that followed Jesus, and ate at his Table.

The Samuel story begins "in the return of the year." In the spring, the time of year kings go make war. It's seems perhaps odd for us to think about this being a seasonal event. But if we consider the Hebrew words for "war" and "bread," we see they're related. War is about getting bread, bread understood more generally as food. Kings made war when they needed food for their kingdom. In the spring of the year, when the stored food from last year's harvest is reaching its end, kings went to war; they did battle for the survival and well-being, for the shalom of their kingdoms. And it's still true today if you think about it. We don't have an annual time for going to war, but when our survival is threatened, when our well-being... when our president *perceives* that we are at risk, he leads our country into battle. So too David is responsible for his kingdom. It's that time of year and David sends his army to the battle field while he himself stays home, safe in his house. Hmm. That still sounds familiar doesn't it?! Not much has changed since David's reign!

Looking at John's image of the Kingdom of God, Jesus has not stayed home. Jesus is present with the people—as God's Word-made-flesh. Jesus isn't staying safe in heaven—he's on earth, vulnerable as all humans are vulnerable to threats and risks. Like the Ark of God in the Samuel story that is carried to the battlefield, Jesus too is in the middle of the action, at the center of people's struggles and pain and brokenness, and at the center of their victories and joys. Pain and joy, brokenness and healing, the tomb and resurrection—these come with being human. Jesus doesn't wait for the spring of the year to tend to the well-being of the Kingdom. In the Kingdom of God, it is *always* time to return, to turn, to repent. In the Kingdom of God, we don't have to wait until we've been emptied—full, abundant, eternal life is available for us in *all* seasons... at *all* times.

Are we willing to go with the Ark of God, with Jesus, into the open, outside of the safety of our homes, into the unprotected spaces where life's most difficult and dangerous battles take place? Are we willing to go outside the walls of our church, beyond the safety and familiarity of our doctrines and beliefs? There are clearly places and spaces in our living not confined, but lived in open, grassy fields where God our King is always present. Where are there places and spaces where we—as individuals, as a community—maintain the comfort and security of our known walls and our given confinements, places where Jesus—the slain and resurrected lamb—is *not* on the throne... is not our host. In the Kingdom of God, our King is always present with us, *especially* visible in the open, grassy fields.

It's reasonable in the earthly kingdom that David stays home, in his house, as a way of protecting himself. He is, after all, the king. Imagine our president joining his troops on the fields in Iraq or Afghanistan! Kings and presidents don't do that. So David sends *others* to do battle, to find bread for his kingdom. He avoids the struggle; he has time on his hands. From the roof of his home, likely the tallest house on the block, he has a view of his kingdom, and his subjects. His observations invade private spaces. But he's the king. He can. When he sends for Bathsheba, it's as though he's browsing through a mail-order catalog, sees something he likes, and orders it delivered to him. Bathsheba does what is expected of her. She is the king's subject, even when he clearly abuses his power.

Jesus has no such time on his hands. He doesn't stand in high places, detached, observing. In the middle of life, his eyes are on his God, on the One who sent him. The John story begins with Jesus on the mountain with his disciples. When he looks out at the people, he is looking not for what he wants, but instead seeing what *the people* want and need. His attention is on people. He sees people as they are, created in the image of God, as

children of the One True King. Jesus stays focused on his ministry, the work of shalom-ing, making whole, saving, healing, lifting burdens, giving people access to Living Water and to Bread, bread that eternally satisfies and sustains. The thousands of people following him are evidence that he *sees* them, and sees their lives.

When Jesus loses his focus, he withdraws, sometimes alone, sometimes with his disciples, taking time to pray, to re-align himself with the Holy One of Israel, to return, to turn to his Source. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus isn't interested in collecting power for himself. When the people want to make him king, he withdraws. He will not be made into the kind of king they want. Jesus refuses to be turned into the kind of king or president, that we want him to be. Nor will he turn people into his subjects. Jesus' disciples are his friends—they are *not* his officers, not his servants sitting outside the palace gates, not his subjects at his beck and call. In the Kingdom of God, we all have equal access to the Throne of the One we serve, a Throne that is not set apart, but in our midst, at the center of the action, at the center of life.

From the space of several thousand years, it's easy for us to shake our heads at the attempts and desires to crown Jesus for an earthly kingdom. It is so clear to us that his Kingdom is not of this world. And yet, aren't there times that we want to demand and impose Kingdom of God ethics and expectations onto our earthy empire? We lobby our president and his officers, our local mayors and their councils. Are we doing so from within the Kingdom of God, from the recognition that *Jesus* is our president? How do we live in *both* the Kingdom of heaven *and* in our earthly kingdoms without confusing the two? How do we live in the United States as *friends* of Jesus rather than as subjects of the state? Was it Jesus' practice of withdrawing and retreating that made it possible for him to proclaim *and*

live in the Kingdom, on earth as in heaven? Do we follow Jesus' practice of withdrawing, of returning to God, of turning to prayer, away from the crowds and the busyness of our living, to a quiet and silence that lets us hear God speaking within our hearts?

In David's kingdom, David invites Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, the man he has betrayed, the man he will continue to betray... David invites him to dinner. And he wines and dines Uriah until he's drunk. It is surely a dazzling and dizzying experience for Uriah to be invited to eat at the king's table. After all, he's Joab's armor-bearer...*not* likely used to eating with kings and officers. Not likely used to eating the king's food. Not likely drunk on the king's wine alone, but on the experience of being with his king, in the company and at the table of his king. To be in the presence of the most powerful man in Israel is surely intoxicating.

The Table and the Host in the Kingdom of God, as John paints the scene, could not be more different. There are more people than can possibly fit around any table, and yet Jesus asks *everyone* to sit down, to sit at the Table. *Everyone* is invited. There is no waiting for a special invitation, no rsvp-ing, no sleeping at the entrance of the king's gate with servants. There is no one to tell you where to sit or who to sit with. Equal access to the Table offends *every* social standard of Jesus' day; it offends *our* social standards, our religious standards. (Though we are likely *much* more subtle in the ways we sort and rank our seating.) The Table in the Kingdom of God is in the open field, *not* confined within the walls of a palace, *not* contained by cultural, social, or religious boundaries. Imagine the happy chaos and confusion of this *now intimate* gathering, of passing the bread and fish between people who moments earlier were strangers! Imagine the delight knowing they didn't have to go looking for food to feed their hunger, or compete with this mass of people for a place in line to buy food!

Imagine their contentment and satisfaction as they ate their fill, as they *all* ate their fill! Imagine their amazement when they saw the leftovers, enough for doggy bags all around! In the Kingdom of God our needs are anticipated and responded to before *we* know we need, and it is *always* more than enough.

Jesus fed this crowd with the food from a *child,* new food, food that nourishes our deepest hungers, satisfies our very beings. Dining at Jesus' Table will *not* make us drunk. Our host Jesus will *not* feed us food contaminated with injustice. He will *not* give us food tainted with the abuse of the land, food that is sure to dull our senses. The Bread of Life satisfies and sustains.,.. as manna from heaven, satisfies our bodies, sustains our spirits. The Bread at Jesus' Table makes us one with each other, one with creation, one with the land. Bread made from grain grown in fields of abused land, harvested with hands broken by the injustices of low wages and unfair trade so that we can buy cheap food and cheap goods... the bread served at the table of injustice leaves us empty, hungry. A diet of injustice diminishes our ability to see. It numbs our senses; we are left wanting more, afraid we won't have enough. The table of injustice leaves people at the king's gate, waiting, hungry, betrayed. The bread of injustice cannot sustain or satisfy us. But the Bread that Jesus took and blessed, broke, and gave to the people *does* satisfy and *it is enough*. The 12 basketsful of leftovers—one basket for each of Israel's 12 tribes—it *is* enough for *everyone* in the Kingdom. In God's Kingdom, as Jesus has shown us, we don't need to deny *anyone* access to the Table.

In David's kingdom, people washed themselves, made themselves ritually clean, ready again to be in the presence of their families, their communities and God. They washed themselves as Bathsheba had done before the king defiled her, and betrayed her. King David took, without blessing... he *took* and *broke* and betrayed, sending his subject, his servant to the

front lines of the battle while *he kept* Bathsheba for himself. And Uriah went, without questioning his king, admirably loyal, Uriah gave his life for his king, for the one who betrayed him in so many ways.

At the Table that seated the 5,000, the host wasn't concerned about ritual purity. The Bread that fed this crowd likely violated more than a few of their cult and culture's expectations. But hunger and healing, nourishment and salvation, liberation and justice, repentance and forgiveness, restoration and shalom *cannot* wait for ritual cleansing, cannot wait for the spring of the year, cannot wait—not even for *our* rules and doctrines. It is messy when we break the rules and invite people to the Table. It is messy and beautiful! At the Table in the Kingdom of God, our Host has given *his own* life. Our host has taken the place of the servants, serving Bread to the thousands. Jesus as host waits for us, is willing to be broken, is willing to be sent to the cross. At the Table in God's Kingdom, the cross is not the end, but the beginning, the opening, the opportunity for resurrection, for new life—abundant, unlimited, eternal life, now.

May we look for God in the open fields. May we—particularly when we are hungry and unsatisfied, broken and in pain, may we see Jesus inviting us—all of us—to sit at God's Table, and feast on the Bread of Life.