

*The Slippery Slope*  
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**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 29, 2018**  
**2 Samuel 11:1-15**  
**John 6:1-21**

Ever since “I Love Lucy” starring comedienne Lucille Ball first aired in the 1950’s, the “situation comedy” has been a mainstay of American television. One of the most-used plotlines involves a character’s telling a mild lie or pretending they’re something they’re not. Imagine the grocery-store clerk trying to impress the beautiful girl he just met by telling her that he’s a brain surgeon. Comedy ensues when the liar has to keep saying and doing more and more outrageous things to perpetuate the deception. But the charade is always uncovered in the required 30 minutes. The hero or heroine is embarrassed but learns a valuable lesson about honesty. And, of course, it always turns out that the beautiful girl likes the grocery-store clerk just fine even if he isn’t a brain surgeon.

We laugh along, often a little nervously. For who among us has never told a harmless lie, that required another harmless lie, that led to another? We even have a name for this kind of situation. We say we’ve gotten ourselves on a “slippery slope.” It refers to taking an action, often a benign or well-intentioned one, and that one first step results in a chain of events that are almost always both unforeseen and unwanted. Slippery slopes all have one thing in common: getting on them is easy, and getting off is next to impossible.

A good place to observe the principle of the slippery slope in action is in Washington, DC. The two most famous examples, one from each side of the political aisle, were known as Watergate and Monica-gate, scandals that led to the forced resignation of one president and the impeachment of another. There’s a popular saying around political circles that says, “It’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up.” That was certainly the case with both Watergate and Monica-gate. The problem wasn’t the original wrongdoings, which were relatively minor – one a bungled office burglary and the other a sexual dalliance. In each case, it was lying about it that was the first step onto the slippery slope of deception and misuse of presidential power that stretched the nation’s capacity for forgiveness to its limit.

People still step onto slippery slopes every day in Washington. Both elected officials and candidates for office have been doing it for years, and now the press has gotten into it, too. As it becomes obvious that yesterday’s statements were untrue, they try to limit the damage with new and even bigger untruths. It’s likely

that these statements, in turn, will be amended and clarified as it subsequently becomes apparent that they are false, too.

And lest you think this is a new phenomenon, I give you today's story from 2 Samuel chapter 11, verses 1 to 15. The story begins in "...the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle." (2 Sam 11:1, NRSV) This intro is a subtle dig at King David, who has not, in fact, gone off to battle. He has sent his most trusted general, Joab, to fight in his place. Historians are unclear as to why David would have remained in Jerusalem while his armies went off to fight. A charitable explanation might be that his generals wanted him to remain behind for his protection. But then again, the author may be implying that David is something of a shirker.

But whatever the reason, David finds himself with time on his hands, and that is what leads him into trouble. Most of the homes in Jerusalem were built around open courtyards, and the roof of David's palace would have had a commanding view of the city. One evening as he is idling about, he looks down and sees Bathsheba in her bath, and is overcome by her great beauty. Even though he knows that she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, David still calls for her, and takes her to his bed. She subsequently sends David a very simple message: she is with child.

David's first all-too-human instinct is to try to find a way for his indiscretion with Bathsheba to remain a secret. His first plan is to arrange for her husband, Uriah, to spend a night with her, which will give David cover by providing an explanation for Bathsheba's condition. To make that possible, he has to have Uriah sent home from the battlefield. This in itself must have seemed a little odd. According to information we learn later on in 2 Samuel, Uriah the Hittite is one of Israel's 30 greatest warriors. It is strange that so valuable an asset should be called back from the thick of the battle for some small talk with the King about how the battle was going. But David can live with that – nobody is going to question the king's decision.

So Uriah returns, and is summoned to the king. When Uriah and David have finished speaking, David tells Uriah to go home and "wash his feet." Footnotes to the King James Version tell us delicately that means "refresh himself." More modern versions of the Bible will tell us right out that this is a euphemism for "now, go home and sleep with your wife."

But David has not counted on the scruples of Uriah the Hittite, who provides a clear counterpoint to David himself in this story. Uriah cannot in good conscience stay in the comfort of his own home, while his fellow soldiers are in the field. He sleeps on the ground, outside the palace, with the rest of the King's guard. He does the same thing the following night, even after David has gotten him drunk at dinner.

David is caught up in the desperate need to keep his liaison with Bathsheba a secret. In the ultimate misuse of another human being, David writes an order for Uriah's execution, and asks Uriah to deliver it to Joab. In all likelihood Uriah could not read, but it wouldn't have mattered. David knew he could count on Uriah's being too loyal a soldier to open the letter.

Joab arranges for Uriah to die on the battlefield. No doubt Joab had misgivings, but he obeys his king's order. By the end of the story, the slippery slope has carried David from what was probably a relatively harmless neglect of his kingly responsibilities, to lust, to adultery, to deceit, and finally, to murder. Along the way, he has betrayed the trust of one of his finest soldiers and abused the friendship and loyalty of his greatest general. It is a cautionary tale to say the least, but its message is made all the more powerful for us by the fact that so great a man, and man of God, as King David could find himself stuck on such a slippery slope as a result of his own choices.

In today's gospel lesson from John, the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, Jesus faces a situation where his choices might have gotten him onto a slippery slope. John wrote that after his miracle the people want to declare Jesus their king. You heard Paul read that "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." (John 6:15) Did you wonder why he would do that? Why would Jesus walk away from an opportunity like that? Jesus was trying to lead a revolution; to change the world. What better springboard to power than to be acclaimed king by legions of adoring subjects?

But Jesus knows that this would be the going in exactly the wrong direction. The use of power by Jesus throughout his life and ministry stands in stark contrast to the Bathsheba chapter in King David's reign. Jesus understood the allure of worldly power to humankind, and the enormity of the temptation for those who have power to use it to pursue their own desires. This isn't the first time Jesus has had to face such a decision. In his temptation in the wilderness, Satan had offered Jesus control of all the world's kingdoms. But even then Jesus knew then that that would have been the first step onto a slippery slope that would have led him inexorably away from God, and from God's purposes. Unlike David, Jesus refused to take that seemingly harmless first step.

The story of King David and Bathsheba is a surprising one to find in the Hebrew Bible. It is an unflattering picture of abuse of power, adultery, deceit, and even murder by proxy by Israel's greatest and best-loved king. I think the writers are to be commended for including it. But perhaps even the spin-doctors of that day knew they could not credibly launder this one out – not when history is so very full of powerful people who have seen wealth and power simply as a means of obtaining more wealth and power. This story asks us to reflect on why it might be that we can so easily think of examples from our own lives of people who misuse positions of authority, in the words of a former U.S. President, "Just because I can?"

We can use the freedom God gives us pursuing things that always end up leading us into trouble; things that put us on a slippery slope taking us farther from God. We can go our own ways like David did with Bathsheba, and have lives that never seem quite right – lives full of unintended consequences, lives where it seems that we're always trying to clean up a mess or cover our tracks, all the while making things worse. Or, we can allow ourselves to be lead deeper and deeper into the kind of life that Paul describes in this beautiful prayer he offers in his letter to the Ephesians: "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19)

God wants to set our feet on a different kind of slope, and our lives on a different kind of trajectory. And we get there by letting God control that very first step.