

Nothing But the Truth?

^{NRS} **1 Chronicles 20:1** In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, Joab led out the army, ravaged the country of the Ammonites, and came and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. Joab attacked Rabbah, and overthrew it. ² David took the crown of Milcom from his head; he found that it weighed a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone; and it was placed on David's head. He also brought out the booty of the city, a very great amount. ³ He brought out the people who were in it, and set them to work with saws and iron picks and axes. Thus David did to all the cities of the Ammonites. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem. ⁴ After this, war broke out with the Philistines at Gezer; then Sibbecai the Hushathite killed Sippai, who was one of the descendants of the giants; and the Philistines were subdued. ⁵ Again there was war with the Philistines; and Elhanan son of Jair killed Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. ⁶ Again there was war at Gath, where there was a man of great size, who had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; he also was descended from the giants. ⁷ When he taunted Israel, Jonathan son of Shimea, David's brother, killed him. ⁸ These were descended from the giants in Gath; they fell by the hand of David and his servants.

21:1 Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel. ² So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, "Go, number Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, and bring me a report, so that I may know their number." ³ But Joab said, "May the LORD increase the number of his people a hundredfold! Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord's servants? Why then should my lord require this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?"

Are we always supposed to tell the truth? To tell the truth- and nothing but the truth so help me God? Or are there times that demand we tell the truth, but as Emily Dickenson said, we tell it slant?

This question- this is the question First and Second Chronicles poses to us.

So First and Second Chronicles. Chronicles are without a doubt the best kept secret in the Bible.

For churches who follow the revised common lectionary, which we normally do, you will NEVER, not in three years, come across a text from First or Second Chronicles.

I will admit to you that before seminary I had never even glanced at the books.

People told me that Chronicles were just a kind of supplement to the “real” history in Joshua through Second Kings. And if you read those books, which are much more popular, why there’s no point in reading Chronicles. That’s what I was told anyway.

And this attitude isn’t a new one. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, the name for Chronicles is Paraleipomena, which literally means “Supplements”.

But it wasn’t always like this. Some of you know that the Hebrew Bible is arranged differently than the Christian Old Testament. The Christian Old Testament starts out with the Torah, then we go into the History, then the Wisdom literature, and then we finish with the Prophets. The Hebrew Bible starts out with the Torah, the first five books of the Pentateuch. But then they go straight into the Prophets. And then after the Prophets the third section is called the Writings- and it includes everything else. And the very last book in the writings, the last word of the Hebrew Bible, is Chronicles. And you know, the first and last chapters always tell you the most about a book. Giving Chronicles the last word- the Hebrew Bible is telling us this is a very important couple of books indeed, not just a supplement, to be skipped over if you’re short on time.

And indeed, modern scholars have been starting to give Chronicles a lot more attention to these nearly forgotten books. And what we’ve been learning is that they really aren’t just supplements to Samuel and Kings, but they give us an entirely different perspective on the story of Israel, the story that we also hear in Samuel and Kings. Does that make sense? What’s going on is that where the books from Joshua through Second Kings gives us one version of Israel’s story, one probably compiled when Israel was a

powerful kingdom; First and Second Chronicles gives us another version, written much later when Israel was trying to rebuild.

Of course, whenever you get two people, or two groups of people looking at anything, they're never going to see exactly the same thing.

And wow, is this the case here. This morning I'm just going to focus in on one of these places, but believe me when I tell you that it's the tip of the iceberg. People have made careers comparing these two different versions of Israel's story. But today we're just going to look at one really telling moment.

The moment starts off with one of the most famous introductory lines in all scripture: "In the Spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle." In the Spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle. If it sounds familiar it's because we heard it last week in Second Samuel. We heard this phrase word for word- and it's the ominous introduction to the terrible David and Bathsheba episode.

In Second Samuel when we hear this line it chills us, because we're hearing that it's the time that good kings roll their sleeves up and get to work- but David stays behind. And there in Jerusalem, when all his friends are out not bathing and camping and doing all those manly things, David's all alone wandering around the palace. And it's like dark music in a movie soundtrack- we know this isn't good. We know all about idle hands and devil's work. And sure enough, we hear one of the most tragic stories in all of Scripture- where David not only seduces a married woman, but she becomes pregnant, and then he tries to cover it up, and he winds up murdering Uriah, her husband, rather

than coming clean. And in then, the way they tell it in that version of Israel's story- all this leads eventually to Absalom, David's son, rebelling against his father and also winding up dead.

So, when we hear in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle- we get tense, and we start to put our hands over our eyes as the story starts going South on us. But, what happens here? Well it's totally different, isn't it?

Where's Bathsheba? Where's Uriah? Where's the tragic, tawdry story?

Well, you'll be reading Chronicles a LONG time looking for this- because in Chronicles, they don't exist. Bathsheba? Uriah? They don't even get an honorable mention in Chronicles.

Now this along wouldn't be so troubling. I mean you can understand how two people trying to tell all of Israel's story in a mere couple of books- I mean they have to be selective, they can't include everything. And maybe one person would think this or that story is more important than the other. I mean that's just the nature of different people telling a story, right?

Yeah, except for that beginning! Except for that introduction- in the springtime, the time of the year when kings go out to battle. I mean it would be one thing if Chronicles just ignored the David and Bathsheba story- you might even wonder if maybe they didn't even know the story if that were the case. But they start out with a direct quote of the story, it's a literal quote, but then they tell a VERY different version of how David spent that Spring.

Did you notice what Chronicles has to say about David's spring? It's not shameful- it's amazing. David let's his general Joab go up against this city, Rabbah.

And he let's Joab clear it out, only to then travel out and take the crown from the leader's head and place it on his own. And this begins what is basically a Schwarzenegger action movie- David goes crazy against the Ammonite cities. And then, he takes his warriors and goes out against the Philistines who are described as giants. One of them is the brother of Goliath- and it says his spear was like a ginormous beam. And then at Gath there's this monster who so big he has extra toes and fingers- he's got an extra toe and finger on his hands and feet making for 24 digits instead of 20. But David and men triumph against them all!

But then, the Chronicler knows he has to say something. The story can't all be good- not the way he started it, saying it was springtime, the time of the year when kings go to war. So David does have a bad moment. Only, it's not exactly a Bathsheba moment.

What happens is that David decides to call for a census. And the text is clear that this is a very bad thing- it says that Satan himself inspires David to do this. And his general, Joab, tries to argue him out of it. But David is obstinate.

Now to us a census is a pretty harmless thing- in fact it's kind of a cool thing. We learn all sorts of sociological information and what not. But this was not why people did a census in the ancient world- there were two reasons, and two reasons only for a census. You took a census to build a bigger army and to extract more taxes.

So what's happening here is not a leader who is losing his focus, who is getting so big for his britches he feels like he can take anything he wants and do anything he wants, like the way Second Samuel tells it. No, what's happening is that if anything, David is

too set on war, too ferocious, not being satisfied with the victories he's won, but wanting to fight on.

And yeah, Chronicles says this isn't a good thing, but it reminds me of people in job interviews, you know, when they have to say what some of their weaknesses are. And you know, it's a job interview, so it's not like they're going to tell you their actual weaknesses- that they're late a lot and argumentative and hard to get along with. They're not going to tell you that. No, they come up with things like, "Oh well, you know sometimes I work too hard. I stay up late really just burning the midnight oil, and I really have a hard time with work life balance. But I'm working on that." You work too hard- yeah, that's a real problem.

I mean that's what's really going on here with David. It's springtime, the time when kings go out to war- does David have a problem? He does. Chronicles tells the truth. But with no Bathsheba, with no Uriah- it tells it slant.

Now for some this is too much. Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch 22*. He wrote another book called *God Knows*, it's the fictional memoir of King David. He rails against Chronicles calling it a whitewash. A lot of other commentators feel the same way.

But I don't. The story of David's springtime in Samuel and the story of David's springtime in Chronicles don't match up- but it's not because Chronicles is trying to protect David. It's because they're trying to protect the people.

First and Second Samuel- they're written during one of the most powerful times in the life of Israel. King Josiah sat on the throne, the kingdom was expanding again, trade was good. It was a time of renaissance, of new birth. And because of this, because of all this power and wealth- the authors of First and Second Samuel, it was important to remind the people, to remind the kings that all their success wasn't due just to their own strength. They didn't want to let all this success get to their heads- and so they comfortable writing an INCREDIBLY human story of David, showing his great strength, and his tragic weakness. The people were riding so high- not only could they stand hearing about David's flaws; they needed to hear about them. As a warning.

But Chronicles? Chronicles is written long after First and Second Samuel- long after Israel could even pretend to be a great power. Chronicles is written after Jerusalem and the temple were burned by the Babylonians in the 589, after the people were carried into exile, after they people, now crushed and all but broken, were allowed to limp back to the land to try and rebuild. It was during this time, this incredibly painful time- this is when Chronicles was written.

And Israel didn't need to be humbled. They had been humiliated. They didn't need to hear about how near absolute power corrupted David absolutely. They had been there and done that. And the Babylonians had taken their t-shirt.

Chronicles doesn't pretend David is perfect- that wouldn't be the truth. And they tell the truth. But they tell it in a way a broken people can stand to hear it. They tell the truth if not slant- then with mercy.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain one of the people in my group was a woman named Gizella. I didn't like Gizella. None of us in the program did. She was as prickly as her name. And overbearing- one time one of us was ordering lunch and he ordered a hamburger. And she told the woman behind the counter that he really wanted the chicken- that she should give him the chicken. And he persisted that he wanted a hamburger- but she didn't give up and kept telling him he should have the chicken, that's it would be much better for him. Finally, he got so mad, he said he wasn't hungry any more and just left.

And she was like this with everyone. At one point she and I were paired up and were giving each other a faith evaluation which was a tool we used with patients from time to time. When it was her turn to offer her evaluation of me- she described me as having an unshakable faith, that I was never troubled by doubts. And by this time everyone in the group knew me pretty well...they all knew that unshakable faith and not having any doubts, they knew this wasn't even a remote description of me. And no matter how I tried to argue with her during her presentation- she wasn't having any of it. Doug was going to have the chicken and I was going to have an unshakable faith. And that was that.

Well, part of our work at the hospital involved what is known ominously as IPR time. IPR stands for InterPersonal Relationship time. If it sounds like the 5th circle of hell, you've got a pretty good feel for it. This was a kind of enforced group therapy where our jobs were to describe something our colleagues had done or said and then say how it made us feel. And most of the time our Tiina, our supervisor, had to pull teeth to get us to say anything. But after this crazy evaluation of me I was just really mad. And

so I went IPR on Gizella- I summoned up every bad experience I had had with her, every little thing that had annoyed me, every phrase, every gesture, and I just laid her out with it. And...it was awful. When I was done, Gizella was in tears, and a kind of pall had fallen over the group. And I, well I didn't feel relieved, or satisfied, or like I had gotten anything off my chest- I felt mean and horrible.

Later, I sat down with Tiina in our one on one time. And she asked me about what I had said to Gizella. And I could tell she wasn't happy about it. And I was immediately defensive, and I said, "Well, I told the truth. That's what you're always telling us to do in IPR. And nobody ever does. But I did- I told the truth. Wasn't that what I was supposed to do?"

And she sat there for a long moment. And she looked at me with her piercing gray blue Finnish eyes and she said, "Ken, did you think Gizella would be able to understand what you were saying? Did you think it would help her?"

And immediately I said, "Of course not."

And she said, "Then why did you say all that?" She then explained to me that yes, telling the truth was part of our work. But more importantly than just telling the truth was learning to assess how much truth a person could take at any one time. She said part of what it means to be a person of faith is not only telling the truth- but tempering this truth we tell with kindness.

Beloved, we have a new week ahead of us. And I don't know exactly what it's going to bring. I know it's going to bring fresh joy for many, you're going to meet new friends and think new thoughts. I'm sure this is true. But, just as surely, the days ahead

will bring incredibly painful moments to us as well- painful moments for the people we love, for the community around us. And my prayer for us is that as we tell one another the truth, as we surely must, that we will have the wisdom to tell our truth and temper it with kindness. **Amen.**