



David, Bathsheba, & Nathan

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost~July 29, 2018*

2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

Psalm 14

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| 1 | The foolish have said in their hearts, "There is no God." *
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;
there is none who does any good. | 4 | Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers *
who eat up my people like bread
and do not call upon God? |
| 2 | The Holy One looks down from heaven upon us all, *
to see if there is any who is wise,
if there is one who seeks after God. | 5 | See how they tremble with fear, *
because God is in the company of the righteous. |
| 3 | Every one has proved faithless;
all alike have turned bad; *
there is none who does good; no, not one. | 6 | Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted, *
but God is their refuge. |
| | | 7 | Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of Zion! *
When God restores the fortunes of the people,
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad. |

Ephesians 3:14-21

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.

John 6:1-21

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Last week we celebrated the Feast of Mary Magdalene. And I talked about how striking it is that almost no women get to tell their own story in the Bible. And not only do they not get to tell their own story, but their perspective is just never represented. They are truly powerless—at the mercy of the men around them within the story and in the telling of the story. This morning we just heard a doozy, a story of the use and abuse of power, and of another silenced woman.

The way the story is told in the Bible it is a story about David—handsome King—a biblical legend. Slayer of Goliath. Brilliant military strategist. Not too shabby city planner—see Jerusalem. He successfully united the Northern and Southern kingdoms into one Israel, and he wrote some fairly fabulous psalms. He was God's chosen, anointed one. And, as we heard in the story today, he was also abusive, coercive, and corrupt in his use of power.

Here's how the story plays out. One day David, despite the continued threat from Israel's enemy the Ammonites, decides he no longer needs to go out and engage in fighting. So, his army engaged in battle, he hangs out at the palace, lying around on the sofa all day. One day David, bored, wanders around the palace and sees Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah the Hittite, taking a bath. The way the story is usually told, depicted in art, Bathsheba is a seductress. Shamefully bathing on the roof, trying to lure the King in with her feminine wiles. I mean, what was she doing bathing on the roof, the hussy? But the text never says she was bathing on the roof. The text says that David was wandering around on the roof, spying on her. Bathsheba was in the process, according to the Hebrew, of taking her monthly ritual cleansing bath, somewhere else in the palace. So it is likely that the last thing on her mind was seducing the King. But, she was definitely on David's mind, and note carefully the language here, "as soon as he saw her he had to have her." So, despite the fact that he had several wives and a bunch of concubines, he "sent for her". David sees, wants, takes. A string of power verbs. Why? Because he can. Because he is the King and he has all the power. This is exactly what the prophets had warned Israel about earlier—warning them they really did not need a king, they had God. The prophets knew that kings—even generally good kings—are dangerous. They knew that kings eventually give in to the temptation of their own power, and they overstep. They take what is not theirs to take. And so David "takes" Bathsheba. We have no idea how she felt—her horror, sense of powerlessness, terror. And none of that was of any interest whatsoever to the Biblical writer. But however she felt about it, before long Bathsheba sends back word that she is pregnant. And everyone knows Uriah has been away at battle for a long time.

First David decides he is going to try and cover the whole thing up. So he tries to set up a romantic weekend for Uriah and Bathsheba. But Uriah he refused to come home until the battle was over. Further, Uriah reminded David that he had taken the soldier's vow of celibacy until after the battle was done. This faithfulness and loyalty irritated David no end, so he decided on a deadly change of plans. He told Uriah's commander that Uriah should be sent to the forefront of the battle, then the commander should order the rest of the troops to withdraw, leaving Uriah alone, on the front lines. And so it was done. Uriah was killed. And David, adding murderer to his list of sins, took Bathsheba as his wife. And she soon gave birth to a son. But the Lord was not pleased by what David had done and soon God was up in David's face in the person of Nathan. And, even after Nathan the prophet ropes David into seeing his own sin, condemning himself, David still gets exactly what he wanted. Uriah is dead and Bathsheba is now one of his wives. And Bathsheba? She never gets to utter a word in the whole story.

By all rights David should have been condemned. He had broken at least 3 of the 10 Commandments one right after the other, he had confessed and he had sentenced himself to die. But, according to the story, God had another thing in mind. "The Lord has put away your sin" Nathan told him. "You shall not die." Good news for David. Quickly followed by the awful news, that the child born to Bathsheba, David's son, would die—because in conceiving him David had utterly scorned the Lord. This is really hard to hear—hard to take. That a child should die for a parent's sin. And my heart breaks for Bathsheba, abused by David, then further wounded by the death of her child. This doesn't square with my understanding of God and I sure as heck don't have any explanation for this. It is just one of those tough, tough texts.

And I will tell you that the story gets even harder. Because David's children by his other wives are watching as this sordid tale unfolds. And they are learning. As Anna Carter Florence writes, "they all know what happened. Dad wanted and took, because he could—and he got away with it. And we might as well cue the ominous music, because there's a predatory precedent on the loose now, and the ones who are the most susceptible and vulnerable to it are David's family."

And before long, in another string of awful verbs, David's son Amnon, "fell in love" with his beautiful sister, David's daughter, Tamar. And soon Amnon is obsessed with Tamar—making himself ill over her. So ill that

everyone in the palace can see it—including his father David. And anyone with sense can see this is not heading in a good direction. Amnon confesses to one of his friends how he feels, one of his wilier friends. This friend, wanting to suck up to a future king, sets up a scheme to get Tamar into Amnon's bedroom. A plan that involves David being the one to send Tamar to Amnon's room. Which, tragically, despite all the warning signs, David does. To do otherwise he'd have to look at himself in an agonizingly clear mirror. And that would reveal all his terrible verbs from the previous chapters with Bathsheba, the ones Amnon has been studying and fantasizing about—and now is asking his father to collude in. Take. Pretend. Send. Come on, Dad; you know what I want. So David blows it again. Sends Tamar to Amnon. It could have gone differently, but David would have had to do something even harder than confessing his sin to the prophet Nathan. He would have had to turn his gaze on his own actions and admit how they've shaped his own children. And that would take the courage of a mighty king.

So the tragic story of Bathsheba, Uriah, and David, ends up with the next generation decimated as well. Amnon rapes Tamar. And a few chapters later, David's sons are dead, and Tamar disappears from the story. And that's where the story ends: a royal mess. We're left wondering what might have gone differently if the father had punished or the younger son had spoken up; perhaps a measure of integrity could have been restored to the kingdom, with justice for Tamar. It would have required deeply painful speech and action, much harder than David's atonement for his sins of two chapters ago, because now we're talking about the atonement of an entire family. But it could have happened. And it didn't.

So, where do we go with the story now? What is the point? Are we supposed to imitate David, the great king or not? I don't think there is a simple point. Except to illustrate the profound damage we can do to each other when we deceive ourselves, when we lack the courage to tell the truth to ourselves and to each other. Perhaps the point is also that God hangs in there with us when we are making a total disaster of our lives and of those around us.

And perhaps more than anything else, the point is not about David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Amnon, or Tamar. Because, as Anna Carter Florence points out, Scripture is a script that is already written and published but our lives are not. You and I are narratives, works, still in progress. So asking of the stories in the Bible how things might have gone differently is also asking how our lives might have gone, might go differently. When we enter the verbs in Bathsheba's story, in Tamar's story, the verbs that are chosen as well as the ones that could have been but weren't—we see ourselves in them. We see the painful messes we can make of life. But we don't suffer them alone. We can claim the strength of standing together. We can claim the courage of planting our feet. And we can claim the freedom of imagining new endings—where things might go differently, so life can flourish. This is an act of imagination, truth telling, and hope. It is an act of the Spirit- an act in which we can engage because we are borne up, urged on, and guided by the God of justice and love. The God of truth telling—who knows the truth of each of us, yet still loves us. The God who sees who we are and who we can be, and who loves us all the way there.