

@Bathsheba---#metoo

2 Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27; 12:1-10

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This summer, as I looked at plans for the fall, I made the decision that I was going to preach from the Narrative Lectionary. The Narrative Lectionary is a 4-year cycle of readings that follows the sweep of biblical history, creation through the early church. This year, the readings began September 9th and will end on June 9th, with the celebration of Pentecost. I decided to preach the lectionary texts because colleagues have shared with me that the structure of the lectionary has enhanced their preaching and has given worship planners and their congregations an opportunity to more fully engage with the texts. I also thought it would be good for me to have to preach what is before me, even if I find it problematic and even if a specific text comes around at a time when I know a particular story will be uncomfortable for you and for me.

In September, we started with God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham. So far, we have journeyed with God's people as they were freed from slavery in Egypt, as they wandered in the wilderness, camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, were given the commandments and renewed the covenant having finally claimed the land God promised them. And we have only been at this about 6 weeks. I've been feeling pretty good about my decision to jump on the lectionary wagon, until this week when I almost bailed, wanting to switch this week's text out for something a little easier, a little fluffier, maybe a little more like, "And Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me.'"

But, I promised myself I would really try to stick with it. So, I need to tell you, this sermon contains some adult subject matter. And in many ways, it seems ripped from the headlines, especially in light of the 'me too' movement. We've talked about the 'me too' movement before. It

is a global movement that highlights the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. It was founded in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing. The vision from the beginning was to address both the shortage in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, to be at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt sexual violence. But now, because of the viral #metoo, a vital conversation about sexual violence has been thrust into the national dialogue. What started as local grassroots work has expanded and is helping to de-stigmatize the act of surviving by highlighting the impact of sexual violence worldwide.

This is the 'me too.' story of Bathsheba told in 2 Samuel 11:1-5:

11 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.

² 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. ³ David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴ 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. ⁵ The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

It's not hard to imagine that the news of Bathsheba's pregnancy was a problem for the perpetrator. There was a battle going on and he was not at the head of it, with his army, where he belonged. Instead, he had spent his time as a creepy peeping tom, sexually assaulting the wife of one of his soldiers. I'm sure his preference would have been to forget all about his crime. Unfortunately, he left evidence behind, in the form

of a child. We know it was his child because when he was leering at Bathsheba, she was taking the ritual bath required by law after her period. According to temple law, a woman was unclean during the days of her period, so she had to cleanse herself afterward in order to resume temple worship.

The perpetrator's solution to the problem of Bathsheba's pregnancy? To bring Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, home from the fighting so he could sleep with her. Uriah, and everyone else, would assume the child was his. Uriah was a man of principles, though. He refused to seek the comforts of his own home (and wife) while other men were still fighting. So, he slept outside by the castle gate. When Uriah couldn't be convinced to go to Bathsheba, the perpetrator directed him back to battle, sending his nephew, Joab, who was the commander of the army, a message to put Uriah in the forefront of the battle and have the rest of the men draw back so Uriah would be killed. The plan worked. Uriah was killed. And now, Bathsheba's rapist was a murderer too.

Verses 26-27:

²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

At this point Bathsheba disappears from the story of the crime committed against her and her husband altogether. Bathsheba had done nothing wrong. She obeyed the law, obeyed the king, coming to him when he summoned her, and in exchange, she was abused. That abuse was compounded by an unwanted pregnancy for which she turned to the one with the power for help. His response was to victimize her further by murdering her husband. Adding to the upheaval in her life, Jewish law required a man who raped an unmarried woman to bring her into his home as his wife. Just like that...Bathsheba became one of David's many wives.

Earlier this week, I shared on social media that I was planning to preach on the story of Bathsheba. The comments I received in response to that post were fascinating. One person said, "I've never heard of Bathsheba." Several people immediately pivoted to talking about David, which at first irritated me, as I really want Bathsheba's story to be told. But, we have been conditioned to focus on David, the man. That's essentially what the writer of this story does. And that's what patriarchy does. The story -the life- of the man is always privileged above the women. The women in the stories become invisible and the focus is entirely on the men, especially powerful men, even when those men behave badly.

The story continues with this parable from the prophet Nathan:

2 ¹ and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³ but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." ⁵ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

⁷ Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸ I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹ Why have

you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

Nathan's parable functioned, in some ways, like a mirror held to David's face, causing him, a few verses later to utter the words, "I have sinned against the Lord." Interestingly, David seemed able to quickly see the wrongs of the rich man in the story, but had been blind to his own. Following David's confession, Nathan told him the Lord had forgiven him, but there would still be consequences, he said, "...the child that is born to you shall die."

According to the story, God didn't punish David for what he did to Bathsheba. No, David's "evil" was killing Uriah. The fact that David's crime against Bathsheba was not mentioned by God when he was pronouncing punishment on David leads some to question whether a crime was committed with regard to Bathsheba. In a clergy discussion group this week, questions were asked, "How do you know Bathsheba wasn't attracted to David? How do you know it was rape?" Honestly, I don't and can't know for sure, I am making an educated guess.

I read the beginning of the story, where the author makes a point of telling us Bathsheba was tending to her personal needs, according to Jewish law, as a clue that Bathsheba is a faithful woman. There is no reason to believe that she was looking for trouble. She was where she was supposed to be, doing what she was supposed to do. On the other hand, the author tells us David was not where he was supposed to be...with his army, remember, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...David remained at Jerusalem."

In addition, I just can't get past the imbalance of power. David had all the power. Bathsheba had none. The person with the power always, always has the responsibility to ensure the well-being of the one or ones who are vulnerable. David's abuse of power wreaked unbelievable havoc in Bathsheba's life. This understanding of the dangers of power is the reason ministers, in our code of ethics, promise not to have intimate relationships with members of our congregations. This is why doctors are supposed to avoid relationships with their patients. People, to whom others come for help, have a responsibility to keep the ones who are hurt, sick, vulnerable safe. It is always the person in power's responsibility to protect the one with less power in any situation. Bruce Birch, in his *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* contribution examining 2 Samuel, writes, "This is a classic story of the arrogant misuse of power for personal whim. The story of David's adultery and murder reminds us of the deadly spiral of violence that can escalate from a single act."

With the exception of his use of the word "adultery," I agree with Birch completely. This *is* a stunningly awful misuse of power, which yielded awful consequences for Bathsheba. I don't see David's actions as adultery, though. Adultery implies consent. Bathsheba did not have the option to say, "No," and I know that makes some of us uncomfortable. It makes us uncomfortable because the man who raped Bathsheba has been painted as one of our faith heroes. We would rather imagine this story a romantic interlude, just like in the movies. That's much more comfortable.

But, we cannot use our discomfort as an excuse to leave Bathsheba's story in the shadows. And here's why: There are people in our lives who, like Bathsheba, are victims of someone else's abuse of power. Those people are watching how we talk about stories like this, in the Bible and in the news. We may not like this story, but in telling it, in hearing it, and in condemning David's actions, not just for Uriah's

murder, but for Bathsheba's rape, we create safe space for the ones in our lives who are survivors of sexual assault and maybe even the ones who are still being victimized today. We cannot be silent. The truth is, whether the writer chose to highlight it or not, if this story happened, God saw what was done to Bathsheba, just as God sees what is done to each one who is wounded in our world today. Bathsheba, and every woman (or man) who has been abused, is a beloved child of God. And God demands justice for all of them, whether the author of 2 Samuel got that or not, it's the truth.

Last, it's time for us to face the truth about David. In the stories of David, we see him slay a giant, maintain an intimate, loving relationship with Jonathan, show extreme bravery as a leader *and* rape Bathsheba *and* murder Uriah. David can be both a person who has done good things and he can also be a person who has done really, really bad things. That shouldn't be hard for us to imagine. David was no different from some of the people making news in the world today. The Prince of Saudi Arabia can both move equality along in his country by giving women the right to drive and also be responsible for the brutal murder of a journalist. Comedian Bill Cosby can both have been awarded the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award and the Presidential Medal of Freedom and be guilty of sexually assaulting multiple women. The list goes on and on. And those are just the famous people in the news.

I am not suggesting we throw the Davids of the world away. I truly believe there is nobody beyond God's reach. We serve a God of second chances, a God who is in each one of us. What I am saying is that, for far too long, we have been casting the Bathshebas, the 'me too' survivors, into the shadows. The story of Bathsheba, and every other survivor, teaches us that power can be dangerous. As people of faith, we must be vigilant and creative, like Nathan, in speaking truth to power and making it clear, by our words and our actions, whose side we are on. We must use our power to heal and protect. We must be on

the side of the vulnerable because, honestly, the ones with the power...they don't need our help.

I will close this morning, with an excerpt from Psalm 51, a psalm attributed to David. While not written by David, this psalm has traditionally been read as David's repentant response having heard the truth from Nathan:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;^[a]
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right^[b] spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing^[c] spirit. Amen.