

Narrative Lectionary: David and Bathsheba.... and Nathan

October 21, 2018

You didn't know there would be a quiz this morning, but see how well you do as we catch up from last week. When we last left off, who was the leader who said, As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord? a. Moses b. Aaron c. Joshua d. Jacob.

How many tribes were the people supposed to kill as they took possession of the land? a. Three b. twelve c. seven. When Jesus feeds the Gentiles, how many baskets are left over? (Seven). Apparently Jesus is saying, Here is how to love and serve your enemies.

Before the Israelites had kings, they were served by a. attorneys b. governors c. judges

The first king of Israel was a. Charles b. Edward c. Saul

Thank you for playing! God gave them Saul as their first king. Saul fell short of what God required, and so God chose David the shepherd boy to become king. David was a mighty ruler; he expanded the kingdom; he centralized worship in Jerusalem by bringing the ark there. The citizens loved him. And by the time we come to our story today, he had accumulated seven wives. If somebody ever says to you that they believe in the biblical view of marriage, my guess is they aren't looking at the kings of Israel as examples.

So one afternoon, King David is up on his rooftop, perhaps with a drink in his hands. As he surveys the cityscape, he sees a beautiful woman who is ritually bathing. That's what women had to do to return to temple worship after their monthly cycle, because they were ritually impure. Her bathing ritual occurred up on the flat roof of her house, with the help of her servants, probably done in a discreet way.

Bathsheba is right where she is supposed to be. No, she isn't a temptress on the rooftop, a seductress, trying to lure her neighbor over to the house for a tryst. She is doing the right thing according to the law.

The problem is King David is *not* where he is supposed to be. He is the king, and the country is at war. He is supposed to be leading the troops. This is different than our presidents, who stay at home and monitor the war from the Pentagon. No, David is a warrior king. He is the head of the army. He should be leading his troops. But he isn't where he's supposed to be. And that leads to him abusing his power.

Let's just name here that when David sees Bathsheba, he has a choice. He can turn away; he can walk back down the steps. He can go play the lyre, like he did as a shepherd. But he makes a choice that will haunt his kingship. He sends someone to inquire about the woman. He makes a choice to pursue what is not his.

All throughout the day we have choices to make. One of the reasons I try to start my day with a time of meditation or even a very short time of prayer is because I know temptations will come up throughout my day: the temptation to say an unkind word; the temptation to want something that doesn't belong to me; and I'd better be ready for the battle. David is in a battle, all right, but it's not the one he's supposed to be in. He's in a battle with temptation.

He already has seven wives, but he lusts after his neighbor. And he makes a choice to pursue his desire. He sends someone to inquire about the woman. A servant comes back and says, "This is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So now David knows that she is married, in fact, married to one of David's mighty men, one of his fierce fighters. His mighty men were a kind of commando force that fought for David.

So, yes, she is beautiful, and yes, she is married. But now sends for her anyway. You know, many of the pictures of this story portray Bathsheba as a seductress, as if she looked up at David and curled her finger towards him. But there is a power differential here: David is the king, and Bathsheba is his subject. I would say that this was not a consensual relationship; it is power play on the king's part. If you are the king of the land, who can say no to you? This is not what we like to call "an affair," this is sexual assault, and now this story has a real 21st century ring to it.

So, as the text says, David lies with her, (she doesn't have any choice) and then she returns to her home. And some time later, she sends word to the king that she is pregnant. By the way, these are the only words Bathsheba says in the entire story. *I*

am pregnant. It's as if Bathsheba is almost a prop in this story. The way it's told, it's really about David and Nathan the prophet. A woman who has been assaulted is almost silent throughout the story. This has a familiar ring to it as well. We have heard recently about women who, after they are assaulted, don't say anything for a long time.

Now the cover-up begins. The king doesn't want anybody to know what he's done, so he sends for General Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. He says, Uriah, you could probably use some "R and R." Why don't you go clean up, head down to your house, and have a little time with your wife. The king thinks, This way, Uriah will think the baby is his.

But Uriah doesn't go to his home; he doesn't spend time with his wife, because he has been consecrated for warfare. He is under a religious obligation to remain abstinent. Instead, he stays outside and helps the servants guard the palace. When David finds out that Uriah hasn't gone home, he asks him about it, and Uriah says, Oh, king, we're at war! All of the troops are sleeping in their tents. I can't go home and relax with my wife.

The next day David tries again. He invites Uriah to a banquet, gets him drunk, and hopes that he will then feel amorous and go sleep with his wife, but it doesn't work. Now David is in a panic. He calls his chief of staff Joab, and says, Send Uriah to the front of the battle, where the fighting is thickest, and then have the other troops fall back and leave him isolated. And this is how Uriah is killed. This is how David thinks he fixes the problem. When a messenger comes back to David with the news, David cavalierly says, Don't let this trouble you; the sword devours now one, then another. Keep attacking. Notice the progression of David's sins: lust, assault and abuse of power, and then murder. It's a slippery slope.

When Bathsheba hears that her husband has died, she goes into lamentation for him. When she is done with her mourning, David brings her into his house and she becomes his wife. And he thinks he's gotten away with stealing another man's wife and with murder.

But God knows. And that's how our lesson starts today, in the aftermath of David's actions. The thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sends Nathan to David. Nathan is the court prophet. The prophets had the difficult

task of making sure the kings heard the word of the Lord. So God apparently tells Nathan what David has done. And Nathan doesn't sit David down and say, I know what you did, and God isn't happy. Nathan tells a story. Emily Dickinson once said, Tell it slant...the truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind. So Nathan sneaks up on David with the truth. He tells it slant.

Listen to the way Fred Buechner rephrases the story Nathan tells: "There were these two men, one of them a big-time rancher with flocks and herds of just about everything that has four legs and a tail and the other a small-time subsistence-type with just this one lamb he was too soft-hearted even to think about in terms of chops and mint jelly. He had it living at home with himself and the kids, and he got to the point where he even let it lap milk out of his own cereal bowl and sleep at the foot of his bed. Then one day the rancher had a friend drop in unexpectedly for a meal and, instead of taking something out of his own overstuffed freezer, got somebody to go over and commandeer the poor man's lamb which he and his friend consumed with a garnish of roast potatoes and new peas.

"When Nathan finished, David hit the roof. He said anybody who'd pull a stunt like that ought to be taken out and shot. At the very least he ought to be made to give back four times what the lamb was worth. And who was the greedy, thieving slob anyway, he wanted to know. Take a look in the mirror the next time you're near one, Nathan said." (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*)

What Nathan actually says to David is, You are the man! You stole another man's lamb. And then Nathan begins to recount what God had done for David; he speaks for God: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you Saul's house, and Saul's wives, and I gave you the house of Judah and the house of Israel. And if you had wanted more, I would have given it to you. So why have you despised the word of the Lord and done what is evil in his sight?

And then God says, These are the consequences of your actions. The sword will never depart from your house; I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house. I will give your wives to your neighbor. And in fact, what happens is David's rebellious son Absalom has sex with his father's concubines, his father's property, in a very public way. David's son Amnon victimizes his half-sister

Tamar, and David's son Absalom kills his brother because of it. Peace does not rest on the house of David.

Look at the ripple effect that our words and our actions can have. God gives us the power to change the lives of others by what we say and what we do. We can build each other up and we can tear each other down. And some of us have more power than others. It is simply given to us by our culture. I am a white, straight, educated American male, and I am given more power by our society. I have a greater responsibility to not misuse that power and to listen to the voices of people who have a lot less power than me. How do we use our power for good?

I heard a story recently about a professor of physics in the 1950s who had been hired by the University of Chicago to teach a course over the winter term in astrophysics. Professor Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar was the Indian astrophysicist whose work became the basis of the Black Hole Theory. He was living at the time at an observatory in Wisconsin, 80 miles from Chicago. Only two students signed up for the class, so the administration figured he would cancel it. But he loved to teach, and so he battled the Wisconsin and Illinois winter and drove 80 miles to and from, on back roads, for these two students.

Do you want to know the ripple effect? A few years later, first one, and then the other student won the Nobel Prize in physics. What if the professor hadn't made that commitment? What if he had decided to stay at home on those winter nights? We do know that two students wouldn't have been challenged and enlightened and encouraged the way they were. Our actions have a ripple effect, for good or for ill.

But let's think about this encounter between Nathan and David again. Nathan held up a mirror to David. Nathan said, Take a look at yourself. Consider your actions. Look at the harm you've caused. We all need someone to hold up a mirror to us at times. That's what the law of God does. When we hear what God wants us to do, it's like a mirror that gets held up to us, pointing out how we fall short. And when we realize that we can't be the people God wants us to be, we know we need to be rescued. We need someone to save us.

So God visits us in Jesus of Nazareth, and shows us how to live. And then Jesus models for us the way of sacrificial love on the cross. You remember King David used his power to get what he wanted. Jesus, the Son of David, uses the power of

sacrificial love. Jesus doesn't take a lamb from somebody else's flock, Jesus *becomes* a lamb; he gives up his life for the world.

But I want to come back to Bathsheba, because Bathsheba represents so many women whose stories are being told today. She may not even know that her husband was murdered. What choice does she have, pregnant and without a husband, but to be with her abuser, King David. She is like so many women in our world who have had to suffer assault and violence. How can we as the church be a place of safety for the Bathshebas of the world? Even in the story, she loses her identity. At one point she is simply called, the wife of Uriah.

And yet God does find a way to make good happen. The first child conceived by David and Bathsheba dies. The theology of the writer states that the Lord causes the baby to die as punishment for David's sin.

But the second child lives. That child is Solomon, who becomes the next king. And Solomon, the child born to Bathsheba and David, a relationship that shouldn't have happened, Solomon is in the family tree of Jesus of Nazareth. God took the abusive behavior of David, and found a way to work good out of it. In the same way we can hope that the stories we hear out of the #MeToo movement can help us bring to an end the abuse and violence against women.

Sometimes we need to import another text into a story to hear clearer words of hope from Scripture. We hear words of hope for suffering women in the Magnificat. Mary, a poor, teenaged girl who hears that she will bear the Savior of the world, says these words in Luke 1: "God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." As we remember the survivor Bathsheba in this story, we are reminded that God seeks justice for all people, including women who have suffered abuse. Amen.