

Up On The Roof
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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2 Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27; 12:1-13a

Last week we were with Joshua on his deathbed, as he and the 12 tribes of Israel renewed their covenant with God and each other. So what's happened between that moment and this one? Turns out, lots.

- The 12 tribes remain loose family configurations ruled by charismatic leaders like Deborah and her general Barak.
- Ruth the Moabite meets and marries Boaz, they will be great grandparents of King David.
- Because they break their covenant, Israel loses the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines in battle. Israel repents, and God allows them to win it back.
- Saul becomes their first king, uniting both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.
- The Prophet Samuel writes the statutes of the new Kingdom (and copy-edits the first five books of the Bible).
- A young shepherd boy named David challenges a Philistine giant named Goliath and wins! When Saul and many of his sons die in battle, David replaces him as king.

Wow! Are you tired yet?

Today, we wrestle with a part of King David's story that is both shocking and disappointing. It's not shocking for a King to use his power to use people, we've seen that in our days too. But this king was supposed to be a 'man after God's own heart'. As we encounter his descent into bad choices and destructive behavior we wonder... what happened, David? How do you fall so far?

His first bad decision was being someplace he shouldn't have been. Instead of fighting alongside his troops, David send his General Joab off while he stays home safety ensconced in his opulent Jerusalem palace.

Then David watched something he shouldn't have. We are human. We know that beauty can attract our hearts and minds and even cloud our thoughts. Human beings aren't strangers to the allure of attraction. We know we can look away, but do we? David didn't.

Next, David acts upon his thoughts in a way he shouldn't have. Like other women of that day and age, Bathsheba is property, first of her father and then of her husband – both of whom are away fighting David's wars. Bathsheba is merely an object to the king, something to be acquired.

How many women was David romantically linked to before meeting Bathsheba, do you think?

I looked it up, so bear with me... Merab (Saul's daughter) was the first to be engaged to him but that engagement broke and she was then given to someone else. Her sister Michal then married David. But soon after, that marriage broke up, and Michal was married to someone else. Then David married Abigail. A verse later (the couple hadn't even gotten home from the honeymoon) and he picks up a woman named Ahinoam, apparently on the side of the road somewhere. She becomes David's second wife. They run around as a threesome for a good long time. He then marries a third, Maacah bat Talmai, daughter of a local king. Then he picks up a fourth wife named Haggith somewhere. She gives birth to his first son Adonijah. Then David marries a fifth named Abital, then Eglah – he's balancing about six individual wives at this point.

Honestly, he sounds a little bit like that guy in that TLC show, Sister Wives!

So David has all of these women to whom he's married, and he still has Bathsheba abducted and brought to him. Let's be clear, the language in the text tells us that he sent men to take her. Given the differences in power between the two of them, there really is no possibility of true consent as we might understand it today. She has no true agency in this matter.

I can hear the questions, familiar because of how many times I've heard them in news stories. What was she wearing? Oh, she was naked? Well then what did she expect? She was kind of asking for it! How much had she had to drink? And what about her sexual history? How many men had she slept with prior to seducing the king? For the record, I could explain why Bathsheba was naked and how we know this wasn't out of the ordinary. But I won't—because that just feeds into the belief that we have the right to ask.

I have stared at this story all week, trying to heal it for the sake of all victims. I want to heal it for all of us because this is our sacred text and we already knew King David was deeply flawed, but he is nonetheless held up as the greatest king in the history of Israel.

We are told that Jesus was from the house of David, a descendent of David and Bathsheba. And what do we do with all that? Some would argue that the end justifies the means, or merely that we should focus on the good that ultimately came out of the bad. But I won't say that because no victim wants to hear it. I'm not saying God doesn't bring good out of bad, but it never justifies rape. And our society has a huge problem with justifying rape.

The King wanted "one more..." one more land acquisition, one more battle won, one more woman to meet his needs. Even though he already had everything...

David descends deeper into sin and shame when he learns Bathsheba is pregnant. After his plan to trick Bathsheba's husband Uriah into having sex with his own wife in order to legitimize the pregnancy fails, he has him killed on the battlefield.

Make no mistake, the suffering David brings into the lives of others and himself is immense. Bathsheba doesn't get to speak for herself in this story and that we should be careful not to include her in David's sin. He is the one who has made a mess of his own life and others.

He'll try and cover it up by marrying Bathsheba (making her wife #7). The son born to this union becomes ill and dies. Bathsheba has now lost both her husband Uriah and the child she conceived with David.

God promised great things to David, but how quickly did he mess up? Any way you look at it, David's life at this point is a poor reflection on the people of God. When the Prophet Nathan "holds a mirror" up to David to help him see the harm he has done, he quickly repents, although the consequences of his decisions are already in motion.

The truth is that today we have a little more work to do as a society than say "I'm sorry." We have to change the culture. We have to teach our children that they cannot take what doesn't belong to them just because they have the power. We have to teach them to respect their own bodies and the bodies of others. We have to teach consent. We have to teach them to take responsibility for their actions, which they cannot do if we are constantly rescuing them from their mistakes or excusing their behavior.

We have to stand up to a culture that excuses horrific behavior.

Let's set aside for a moment that when Nathan confronts King David, he does so with an analogy that equates Bathsheba with livestock. At least it was a beloved sheep, and not a cantankerous old goat. Still, Nathan is the very definition of a prophet—one who speaks truth to power. And he is

wise—he says it in a way that tricks David into seeing his own sin. David says the man who has done this horrible thing should be forced to repay the debt and then be killed. Nathan says, “You are that man.”

As much as some of us might identify with the victim in the story, the prophet Nathan also forces us to identify with David. Even with this story, we can’t just point the finger. Most of us don’t rape and murder, but in our own ways we all use people. In our minds we make them less than real, less than whole, so that all they represent to us is either what we want or what we fear. Reduced to objects, we use them as it seems to us they were meant to be used. It seems right to us. Power distorts our vision. It is only with love that we can truly see people.

A professor in seminary once said that we need different theories of atonement depending on whether we are a victim or a perpetrator. The perpetrator needs to be told that God offers forgiveness; the victim needs to be told that God offers healing. But I argued then and now that most of us are a little bit of both.

The text says, “*The thing that David had done displeased the Lord.*” I seriously hope this is a major understatement. I don’t want the Lord to be displeased. I want the Lord to be furious!

But we cannot put our contemporary understandings back onto an ancient text and expect ancient people to operate by our mores and then dismiss the scripture when they don’t.

So as much as I want to hurl this story far away from me because I cannot heal it, I know this to be true: The writers of the story may not have recognized it as rape, but God knew. God knew Bathsheba. God knew her heart. God knew that generations would blame her ... but God did not.

God knew, and God wept ... just as God weeps today for every person who is a victim of violence. And God weeps for every person who was wounded into committing acts of violence. And God weeps even for unrepentant people who are so far from God’s intention for them that they hurt others without shame. And God weeps for us when we stand silent in the face of injustice of every kind. God knows, and God weeps. Amen.