

A Advent 4 12.18.22

2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-18, 22-27; Matthew 1:18-25

Focus Statement: Bathsheba taught Jesus to look to the future

Happy Advent friends. The last woman in Matthew's genealogy is the toughest, as we hear how David became "the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." History has tried to redeem what David, painting Bathsheba as a temptress who positioned herself to lure the unsuspecting king. But let's right here at the start nix that theory because the narrator of the story and later the prophet Nathan will make it clear that "what *David* had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord." The other three stories have centered the women, this story very much centers David. I keep referring to Bathsheba by name, but the reading itself did not. Her name was mentioned once in verse three, and then never again. Even in Matthew's genealogy she is listed only as "the wife of Uriah." The purpose of this non-naming, in this one case of a woman in scripture, was intentional to make abundantly clear that this was David's failing, David's sin, David's greed and unethical graspings for that which was not his that led to his downfall. And while that may have been the writer's intention, leaving Bathsheba unnamed also reduces her to a non-person, no more than a plot point in the story of the Great King David's rise and fall. So I want us to keep calling her by her name this morning, to keep centering her in this story, because I think her, who she was, the experiences she lived through, and what she made come out of that experience, especially when paired with our Gospel reading for this morning, tells us something incredibly powerful about God's ability to work through generations. But first, let's spend a little time with the Great King David, who we have heard so much about.

King David is arguably the biggest character in scripture outside of Jesus. You can make a case for Moses or Abraham, but my money is on David. Everything before him leaned towards Israel's desire of a king, everything after him looked back to his reign as the absolute apex of Israelite society. Under David, the empire of Israel stretched from modern-day Syria, through Lebanon, down both sides of the Jordan River, to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea. This expanse was David's doing. David's military prowess and the loyalty David drew from his men is what allowed this growth to take place. After David, Israel would be conquered by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Romans, and it would never again reach the heights of David's rule. The Messiah we heard John the Baptist looking for last week, that Messiah had been promised as the one who would restore Israel to the glory of the days of King David. To this day Middle Eastern and world politics are shaped by the kingdom David created centuries upon centuries ago. This guy had staying power.

Which is kind of surprising because David came out of nowhere. We've heard his lineage repeatedly, so we know the greatness he descended from. But when the prophet Samuel came to anoint him as God's chosen king, his dad had to drag him out of the field. We know from last week that Boaz was a landowner, Boaz's grandson Jesse raised sheep, and David, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, was a shepherd. Scripture tells us David was "ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome," but he was still a kid in a field with sheep.

But he didn't stay a kid in a field with sheep. Almost immediately, David's leadership qualities started to show, and we see he was more than just a pretty face. He was brave, strong, charismatic, a natural born leader. The books of First and Second Samuel are full of stories of David inspiring confidence and loyalty in his men as he led them into battle against impossible odds, keeping them faithful not just to each other and to the mission, but to God. Which is what makes this story of Bathsheba so striking. Because for the first time since Samuel found him in a field, this time David did not lead his troops into battle, choosing instead to stay home in his palace and let others fight his wars.

David was at home in his palace while his men were in battle, when he saw the wife of one of his soldiers, and he wanted her. So, he sent for her, and he took her, and he laid with her. Think of the power dynamic here, he was the king and the commander of Bathsheba's husband. When the king called, she was going to come. And I left this part of the story out for time but when she became pregnant, David brought Uriah back home to try and make it look like the child was Uriah's. But Uriah proved to be more loyal to David and to the men under his command than David was and he refused to leave his soldiers. And so, in response to Uriah's loyalty, to cover up his actions David had Uriah killed in battle, and other men alongside him, so that he could take Bathsheba as his wife and no one would ever know what he had done.

How do we get from this mess to Joseph? Here is where Bathsheba takes ownership again of her story. By the book of First Kings, David's rule has completely fallen apart. An old

man by that point, he relied on others to care for him, while his multitude of children across many women fought and scraped and killed for power. And none of them were people you'd want as a leader, all of them exhibiting David's worst characteristics, his greed, his self-centeredness, the lack of care for those under him that developed as his power grew. When suddenly, out of obscurity, Bathsheba arrived back on the scene. And it's a great story, 1 Kings 1, go home and read it, but she basically convinced David that it had been his idea all along that her son, their son, Solomon should be king, not any of the other children. And just like that Solomon went from like forty-second in line for the throne to being the king of Israel. And Solomon, by all accounts, was a great king. He was wise, thoughtful, conscientious. He had his quirks, sure, but all in all, he was a wise and caring ruler. And Bathsheba made that happen. She had everything taken from her, and she sat back, bided her time, until like all the women we've seen, she stepped into the scene and took the bold step of recentering her own worth in the story. And in doing this, she rescued the line of Jesus' ancestry from destruction.

That, dear people of God, is Joseph's ancestry. A king who thought only of himself and a woman who would not let herself and her family be overlooked. With that, let's look at our Gospel story. Joseph and Mary were engaged—a legally binding contract at the time—but not yet married when Mary was “found to be with child.” Uh oh. This is not great. First century understandings of medicine were different, but Joseph knew how babies are made, and he knew he was not the father. Scripture tells us that Joseph was “a righteous man.” One definition of righteousness is to be right under the eyes of the law. And the law said

that the “right” way to deal with adultery was stoning. That would be right, that would be legal, that would be what Joseph was supposed to have done.

But that wasn’t what Joseph did. Scripture tells us he was “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace [and] planned to dismiss her quietly” until an angel of the Lord appeared and challenged him to go further. And even that first act that Joseph planned on his own, even just being concerned about her standing in society, this seems like not enough by our standards, but it’s huge. What we see there is Joseph being righteous not in the eyes of the law, but in his interpretation of it. Joseph knew that the law was meant to bring life to us and to others, and to interpret it otherwise was to miss God’s intention. Like his ancestor Bathsheba, Joseph refused to follow the whim of cultural expectation and be a set piece in his own story. Instead, he risked his own social standing, and in taking this step, he opened the way for Christ to be born.

These stories, Bathsheba getting Solomon to the throne, and Joseph standing by Mary, are both stories that happened before Jesus was born. But like David’s mistakes affected his children, so I think did these stories of bravery shape Jesus. Because Jesus is the one who comes to judge the world in righteousness. We see from David the danger of that sort of power. It would have been easy for Jesus to go along with the way the Law was being interpreted, giving power to some at the expense of others. He would have made a lot fewer enemies, ruffled a lot fewer feathers, and probably would not have ended up on a cross. But instead Jesus, like his adopted father Joseph had done in claiming Jesus as his

own, redeemed the law, bringing it back to the purpose God had intended for it, to bring justice and light and life to the world, rather than hold the world in the false peace of status quo. We celebrate at Christmas the birth of the one who refused to be a character in other people's stories, a pet Messiah who would follow the role assigned to him. Jesus loved the world too much to settle for righteousness that was not lifegiving. Jesus lived in a way that threw safety to the wind, and revealed the dignity and worth of every living thing. May the power and righteousness and peace of Jesus fill you this season. And may you find the courage to walk boldly in righteousness, knowing that our redeemer is coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.