

**Building Up the Household of Faith:  
Accountable and Counted  
2 Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27; 12:1-9  
Psalm 51:1-9  
Rev. Michael D. Kirby  
Northminster Presbyterian Church  
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It begins when we read them the very first stories from their picture-book Bibles. And they notice. It was brought home to Jessica and me most powerfully two years ago when we were preparing for the first "Stump the Pastor" sermon series and we invited the Sunday School classes to submit their questions. The first question they asked is the one I preached on: "What does God look like?" The second question they asked was: "Where are the Bible stories about baby girls?"

Our children notice that the narratives of the Bible are, by in large, narratives about the men of the Bible. The male-controlled culture of the ancient Middle East permeates the entirety of scripture. From the mythic stories that open Genesis to the apocalyptic literature of Revelation, scripture bears the unavoidable patriarchal stamp of ancient world views about God, about all of humanity, about relationships among people and relationships with God.

It makes it all the more remarkable that some of the woman-centered stories make it through, such as the inspirational stories of King David's great-grandmother Ruth and Naomi (who is also Jesus' great-great many times grandmother), the deliverance made possible by the wisdom and nerve of Rahab and Tamar, and the amazing bravery of teen mother and potential outcast, Mary of Nazareth.

But far too often we are confronted with stories like today's. It is intended as David's story, as David's tragedy really. It marks the end of his rise to power and victory as God's chosen king of Israel. It tells of his slide into decades of palace intrigue as his wives and his sons will shortly begin to jockey for power and the right to rule when he is gone.

Bathsheba is a secondary character in David's drama. She is the one acted upon. There is no reference to her consent, no mention of her assent to anything, and certainly no evidence of her willing participation. No, there is no collusion; there is only wrong. Most of the commentaries of the last century describe today's text as David and Bathsheba entering an adulterous affair. Some preachers and artists even have the gall to paint Bathsheba as the temptress, the one who lured a weak king into infidelity by bathing on her roof. Those versions ignore both the actual text of the Bible and the realities of the ancient world. Mikvah baths, the baths women had to use to become ritually clean after menstruation, were required to be a permanent part of the home. They were built-in and that usually meant they were either underground or they were incorporated into the roof structures.

There is no evidence in the text that Bathsheba was doing anything other than what was required of her by Hebrew holiness laws. David is the one who sins. David is the king

who is not doing what kings are supposed to do. He is lounging on his couch instead of being out with his army. David is the one who looks upon Bathsheba and doesn't immediately turn away, acknowledging the importance of her holy ritual. David is the one who sends for her and demands her presence. David is the one who, when he learns she is pregnant, and her general husband has been out fighting so long it will certainly cause a scandal, calls for Uriah, her spouse, to be sent back to Jerusalem to create the possibility that Uriah could be the father. And then David arranges for him to be abandoned on the battlefield to die the next time he heads back to the front. By every modern definition of the situation, David, God's golden king, commits rape and murder. Yes, Nathan cleverly gets him to convict himself in dramatic and satisfying words of self-condemnation, but still on terms that completely ignore Bathsheba.

Today, I want us for once, to consider this story from her perspective. First, let's acknowledge that she is an immigrant woman in David's empire. We learn later who her father and grandfather were, and she is almost certainly from an Afro-Canaanite group. She married another outsider, the Hittite Uriah, and is trying to assimilate into the nation and faith of Israel. Then, without warning to her, her husband's boss — the chosen one of God, the powerful uniter of Israel — sends for her, takes her to his bed, impregnates her and then plots a scheme worthy of a bad soap opera. It is a scheme that leaves her husband and dozens of his men dead on the battlefield and leaves her completely at the mercy of the king, who had Uriah abandoned to die by enemy hands.

What happens to her and to David in today's text is not the end of her story. She will have two more sons, one named after Nathan, the prophet who speaks truth to David unlike any person on earth, and Solomon, the son who, way over at the end of Second Samuel, Bathsheba will work to help place on the throne when other sons and other wives of David begin to plot against him.

The last time we will read of Bathsheba in scripture is when her son, Solomon, has assumed the throne of his father after David's death. Then Solomon places her at his right hand on her own throne. Like Joseph before her, she will rise from sexual shame to the right hand of power. We won't get to learn much more about her other than that she makes the best of a bad situation and makes a life for herself and her children in David's household. Perhaps what began in violation, by grace became something more. But we know that God, acting through Nathan, made sure David made her a full part of his household. This is not adequate justice by our modern standards but remarkable for that time.

We can no longer tell this only as a story of David and of God's grace to him, despite these most heinous and despicable wrongs. Yes, it is a powerful lesson of grace and accountability and we must celebrate that David was inspired to repentance on an almost superhuman scale. But we must also tell this as a story of the grace to be found in resilience, in how God never abandons Bathsheba as she is made power's victim. We must weep with her and understand how she is ultimately vindicated, and we must honor her journey as well.

But hear me clearly. We don't reconsider this story from her perspective because the #MeToo movement creates a political mandate that we do so, even if that may have been

the spark. We look at this and so many stories in the Bible with fresh eyes not to further some political agenda. It's not even to put forward some progressive theological agenda. It's to remind ourselves that scripture is, for us, the unique and authoritative witness of God's sojourn with humanity. If we only look at the Bible stories from the perspective of privileged men, we are teaching our young women and our young men that that is how God looks at the world; it is privileged men with whom God is most concerned, and with whom God most identifies. And that distorted view of the Gospel, which still holds sway in some corners of the church, must die off, the same way theologies that supported slavery died off.

We, as the church, have been charged with stewardship of the good news as the Spirit continues to reveal it. And that's a commitment we take seriously here. It's why we expanded our library to include stories that inspire us to celebrate women and men as equally blessed, equally called, equally empowered by God, and by the teachings and sacrificial example of Jesus, for the Christian vocation of life. The gospel we hope the children of this and every church will let shape their lives demands it. That same gospel assures us there is no place we can go where God is not with us, no moment when God does not love each of us equally. It also demands that each of us sees the divine image in every human being and that we also are seen as bearing God's image.

It's past time someone, particularly a white cisgender male, stood in an American pulpit and said that Bathsheba's violation by David and her loss and pain are felt as deeply and as importantly by God as David's pain when he realizes the magnitude of his wrongs. It's past time for every pulpit and house of worship to ring out with the assurance that God never stops lamenting the loss and pain of every woman who has ever been victimized by a man who believed his power, his maleness, his so-called "God-given" position in authority gave him the right to deny her physical, emotional and spiritual autonomy. Such actions are never, have never been, and will never be of God.

The gospel is good news for all. And somehow, thanks be to God, the Spirit who inspired humanity to remember these stories and record them for future people of faith also inspires us today to look at them anew. She grants us fresh eyes to see that David's sin, according to Nathan, was against God and Uriah. But we can see the sin against Bathsheba there too. We are to suffer with David, when he hears that the child she carries, a child who could be his king and heir, will not survive. It is meant to punish him, but now we can also hear her cries which take place only off-stage in scripture.

Yes, we have to consider the context. We can't completely judge the ancient world by modern standards. Most women had little or no agency in that world, little or no choice if the most powerful man in the kingdom demands she be brought to his bed. Things we take for granted weren't even considered then, but we can and must give her a voice today. And so, we can hear Bathsheba cry out for justice when school girls are kidnapped and made victims of forced marriage and human trafficking. And we can remember that God remained with her and delivered her. We can see our efforts — to free these captive women and transform the communities and ideas that motivated them — as doing God's work of deliverance.

We can also hear Bathsheba cry out when modern-day Davids belittle women, or seek to deny them agency, or silence their truth. And we can remember that God sent Nathan to confront David in the name of God's justice and grace. And we can confront those powers with that same spirit that seeks justice, repentance and renewal — not annihilation.

David will repent and seek to do right by those he victimizes, including Bathsheba. And the one he viewed as a conquest becomes an honored member of his household. But that is not something for which we reward David, for he simply awakens to what God and we knew all along — that Bathsheba was as worthy of safety, protection, autonomy and honor as anyone else.

May we, as followers of the Christ who stood with the powerless and the voiceless, who called the sinner home in repentance and grace, may we today and every day stand with Bathsheba and with David — victim and perpetrator. May we see how God's grace carried her and transformed him, giving both a chance to begin again — to be one counted, one held accountable, but still forgiven. May we find inspiration for the hard, holy work of being instruments of that grace in the household of God, accompanying and confronting, honoring and challenging, hearing the cries and speaking gracing truth to power, and so be worthy stewards of Christ's church and God's world for those who will follow us. May God make it so.