

Focus: God works through sin to bring healing and new life.

Despite how it's been portrayed, there is nothing romantic, nothing sexy, nothing *good* about this story about David and Bathsheba. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that it is “more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves.”¹

At the time of year when we are told kings go out to battle, David is AWOL, lounging about at home at his palace instead of doing his job. And while there, he spies a woman bathing on her housetop. This is where women were supposed to bathe. It was supposed to be a place of privacy and safety. There's no sign of exhibitionism in the biblical story, just a bored David leering at a woman who's not his wife.

All we know about her is she's beautiful, and she is “Bathsheba—daughter of Eliam—the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” The Hittites were a foreign ethnicity, often at war with Israel, but here Uriah is one of *David's soldiers*. The only details David knows about her are ironically that *he can't have her*. This doesn't stop David. She has become merely an object of his desire. The prophet Samuel warned us several weeks ago that “kings *take, take, take*,” and this is the first of many examples in this story of David *taking*.

He takes her without any words, and then he sends her back to her house. And after a little bit, we get the only words Bathsheba speaks in the entire story, “I am pregnant.” In David's time, as in our own, these words are heard in all different sorts of ways, but for David right now, his reaction is pure fear. He has been caught *taking* what's not his. And so begins act 2: David's elaborate cover-up scheme:

David calls Uriah the Hittite, a foreigner who is fighting *David's* war out of battle and tells him to “go home and wash his feet.” In Hebrew, this is a euphemism for going home and “making love” to his wife. David's idea is simple: everyone will think the kid is Uriah's, and he has nothing to worry about.

He has one problem: Uriah. “The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.” This foreigner Uriah the Hittite is too loyal to Israel, too loyal to God, too loyal to *David* for David's scheming to work. While David is at his palace, Uriah the *Hittite* refuses to leave the battlefield. Tragically, it turns out Uriah is too loyal for his own good.

On the next day, David tries a new tack and invites Uriah to his table. He shows all the signs of hospitality. He feeds him good food, he gives him good wine, he treats him as a friend. Again, he's hoping that Uriah will go home and make love to his wife. But we are told “Uriah did not go down to his house.” Time and again, Uriah the Hittite's loyalty to Israel, God, and David puts David's kingship to shame.

Finally, in the most stunning act of betrayal, after breaking bread with him, David sends out Uriah with a letter to his field general Joab. The letter gives instructions to send Uriah straight to

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).

the frontline—and then instructs all the other troops to fall back, exposing Uriah to combat. David who has taken everything from Bathsheba, who has taken everything from Uriah: his wife, his respect, his friendship, now takes Uriah's very life—even requiring Uriah to carry his own death warrant.

This story is indeed more than we want to know about David. Why would the author of 2 Samuel include this story? Why would we be told this gruesome story about “good King David,” who we have been told before is “a man after God's own heart?”

I think it is because of the second part of Brueggemann's quote: “[This story tells us] more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves.” I've often talked about the positive things we can learn from David: faith, joy, love, loyalty. But there's another side we can learn, too. For all the awful details in this morning's story, we are still familiar with the temptations, moral failings, and tragedies of this story in our own day. If good King David could succumb to them, so do Christians such as ourselves. For this story to truly matter in our lives, we need to understand it not just as a story about David, but as a story about ourselves.

In this story, we are faced with questions:

- David spent his time as king in leisure rather than doing his job to lead the people. When are *we* bad stewards of the authority that has been given to us?
- David turned Bathsheba into an object of desire without even hearing her speak. When do *we* objectify people and treat them as less than human?
- David looked at Uriah as a problem that needed to be dealt with. When do *we* use people?
- Uriah trusted David after he invited him under his roof for a meal. David betrayed that trust. How do *we* respect the trust others give us?
- David, the man who had been given *so much* by God, by Jonathan, by the people, was never happy. He needed to *take* even more. When do *we* forget our blessings and *take*?
- Finally, throughout this story, from Bathsheba to Uriah, from Joab to the soldiers on the field, all the way to his unborn child, David treats so many people as pawns. When do *we* forget other people's human dignity?

This story is hard, and our lives are hard. Somehow despite it all, despite David's failings and ours, despite all the pain, God still works. Somehow at the end of this story, Bathsheba has a child: King Solomon. Several generations later, Jesus would be born from this line, from these people, from this story. At the end of this story, there is still a quiet hopefulness: God is always capable of bringing healing and new life out of even the worst situations.

But part of that is that God will not, and *cannot*, let situations like this stand. God loves us too much; unlike in these dark days of David's rule, in God's kingdom every person has inestimable worth and dignity. In the church, we call this reckoning confession and forgiveness. And it's to that topic we will return as our story continues next week.