

Please note: This sermon addresses the topics of sexual assault and consent.

It's springtime in the 10th Century BCE and that means it is the time for kings to go to battle. David was known as a great warrior and his military victories had earned him the respect of his people and were interpreted by many to show that God was on his side. David was also known as someone who was good and just in the eyes of God. It is not wonder then that for centuries, when this text has been interpreted, people have looked to blame someone other than David for his abhorrent actions. The 1951 movie "David and Bathsheba" is a prime example. David, played by Gregory Peck, confesses to Bathsheba, played by Susan Hayward, how much he desires her. He mocks her husband Uriah for going to battle instead of staying at home with his beautiful wife. "He has no blood, no heart" David proclaims. Otherwise Uriah would desire her as much as David does. As the conversation in this movie continues, Bathsheba confesses that she knew David would be walking on his roof as he does every night and hoped that he would see her bathing and that he would give her the opportunity to please him. The movie changes Bathsheba from the object of David's lust into a conniving seductress who is responsible for the sin of this good and just King of God.

This invented version of the story has permeated popular culture and religious interpretation. Or perhaps you've heard David's rape of Bathsheba referred to as an affair. In this scenario, Bathsheba is not necessarily the instigator, but is a willing participant. Bathsheba was certainly not the first woman to be blamed for the sexual violence of the perpetrator, and we know all too well that this happens still today. Let's unpack the story a bit and listen for Bathsheba's voice in the text. Her voice won't come through in words however. She literally only speaks three entire words in the whole text. But let us listen to her story. Her story deserves to be told the shame and blame that has been put upon Bathsheba for centuries deserves to be challenged.

The first verse of our text this morning sets the tone for the entire story. David is not where he is supposed to be. His troops were fighting, and he was supposed to be

with them. The author made sure to include this little detail. The king stayed in Jerusalem. We don't know if Bathsheba knew this or not. We also don't know why David stayed behind. Maybe he didn't think his troops needed him. Maybe he had grown to accustom to palace life. Maybe he was intending to satisfy his desires with less competition since many of the men had gone off to war.

David sees Bathsheba bathing. Now, our modern concept of bathing is quite different than what was happening in this scene. Bathsheba was not lounging in a bubble bath or enjoying a jacuzzi soak. The text tells us that she was completing a ritual washing 7 days after the end of her menstrual cycle as was prescribed by Jewish law. Bathing outdoors was not unheard of, but public nudity was absolutely not acceptable. It is extremely unlikely that Bathsheba was bathing as some sort of planned seduction. In fact she was likely not even undressed but instead using a cloth to bathe with a robe on. Naked or not, it is David's decision to act. Debating if Bathsheba is naked is much like asking what a woman was wearing when she is attacked walking home. What does she expect wearing a skirt like that, right? No type of clothing or lack of clothing is consent for assault.

David is the subject of all the action described in this opening scene. David gets up from his couch. David takes a walk on the roof. David sees her and is attracted to her. He does not know who she is, so he sends someone to find out. She is an object of his lust and fantasy. David is informed that the woman is Eliam's daughter Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. This statement should have been the end of the story. Bathsheba is married. Not only is she married, but she is married to one of David's best soldiers. Uriah is listed later in 2 Samuel as one of David's "mighty men," an elite group of 37 soldiers. But none of this deters David. Instead he sent messengers to get her and bring her to him. Bathsheba's voice is no where in this series of events. We have no idea what she is thinking or feeling. The action is all about what David wants and what David does. In one verse we are told that David sent for her, she came to him, he lay with her, and he sent her home. In one verse, Bathsheba's entire world has changed.

There is no indication that David is interested in Bathsheba for anything else than to satisfy his desires. There's no tale of him wooing her or their plans to get married. The next interaction we learn of is when Bathsheba sends word to David that she is pregnant. There's no indication of rejoicing on the part of either David or Bathsheba. David's response is not assurance that the baby will be a beloved son of his or an invitation to move into the palace and become a family. There's actually no indication that David responds to Bathsheba at all. Instead, David brings Bathsheba's husband home from war in the hopes that they will do what married couples do after a long separation and everyone will assume the baby is Uriah's. But David's plan fails. Uriah is a good man and though he may love his wife and truly wish to be with her, he feels guilty that his fellow soldiers are fighting without him. It was also law at the time that if a man had sex, they were considered unclean for one day and could not fight beside the other men. Uriah is loyal to his fellow soldiers and to the king. So much so, that even at the King's insisting, he refuses to go home.

Since he won't be able to make it appear that the baby is Uriah's, King David decides to find a way to marry Bathsheba and give legitimacy to the pregnancy. He uses his power as the king to order the commander of the troops to set up Uriah to be killed. David uses his power in an attempt to cover up his sin, by killing the husband of his victim. Our text for this morning ends before we are told the outcome. If we continue to read, we learn that the plan is successful, and Uriah is killed in battle. We also learn that when Bathsheba learns that her husband is dead, she makes lamentation for him. She grieves and prays to God. In the Bible, laments call for God to hear, to see, and to intervene. This is the action of a woman who loved her husband. This is not the response of someone who set out to seduce the king and is hoping to become the king's wife.

This is not just some ancient story. It is a story that is happening still today. Every 98 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted.¹ In many cases, it is people in power using that power to abuse, assault, take what they want, and get away

¹ <http://www.endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-rape-kit-backlog>

with it. This abuse of power happens in workplaces, in schools, in ICE detention facilities, in families, in churches... Survivors of such abuse are often shamed into silence. Who will believe them when it is a respected teacher or a beloved pastor or a dear family member who has used their positions of power to do terrible things. These perpetrators are often considered good people by everyone else. Even when survivors speak up, they are second-guessed, or told not to make trouble. In addition, perpetrators are often not held to account by the justice system. There are hundreds of thousands of rape kits in crime labs and police storage facilities that have never been tested.

In preaching class in seminary, we were taught to look for the good news in each text. The good news in this text seems non-existent. Frequently, as the church, we want to move from despair right to hope because sitting in the despair is just too painful. That's fair. But it can't be our default. Sometimes we need to stay with those topics of despair to be present for people who are suffering. The church especially as been too silent on the topic of sexual abuse. But if we read a little further in 2 Samuel we read about the prophet Nathan. Nathan is the small kernel of good news in this story. God hears Bathsheba and sees what David has done and God is not pleased. God sends Nathan to confront David and call him out. David repents but remains in power. Just like in modern life, justice often seems to evade us. Bathsheba is still married to David and her husband is still dead.

But this doesn't have to be our reality. Like Nathan, we can speak truth to power and advocate for assault survivors. As the church, we can work to eliminate the shame placed on victims and put it back on the perpetrators where it belongs. We can teach our kids and our teens about consent - their right to decide what happens to their bodies and the need to respect the decisions of others. We work to be a place and a people where survivors stories are welcomed and held with love so that no one has to grieve or heal alone. We can advocate for more resources to be put toward solving sexual assault crimes – putting pressure on our lawmakers to properly fund the testing of rape kits and making the solving of these crimes a priority. At the very least, we can stop

perpetuating false interpretations of scripture that portray women as harlots and adulteresses who seduce men who are powerful and yet also somehow unable to resist the temptation of a beautiful woman. These narratives are a form of victim blaming and it needs to stop.

As the church we must ask ourselves what is our response to those who cry out in pain? How do we see or hear them? DO we see or hear them? If we are to be the hands and feet of God, or Christ on this earth then it is our responsibility is to see, hear, and respond to their pain and be advocates for their justice. Survival and grief around sexual assault is the task of a lifetime. We can be a place where survivors do not have to bear that burden alone. May we be a people who speak truth to power, who support those in pain, who allow stories to be told and who exhibit the support and love that Bathsheba and all survivors deserve. The statistics tell me that there are multiple survivors in this room of all genders. Let me take this opportunity to say this from the pulpit. Even if I don't know who you are, know that you are seen. Know that God hears you and loves you. Know that you are not alone and that you have nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. Know that you are God's beloved and nothing and no one can take that away. Breathe in God's love with me. And breathe out God's love upon the world. Amen.