

Trigger warning: today's biblical story has sensitive content about a King who used his power and privilege to have what was very likely a non-consensual relationship with a woman. My natural response was to not preach it because it is a difficult story. The whole thing is a picture of brokenness. But "to leave out the stories of the despicable things God's beloved people did does a disservice to the Bible, its story, God's people, and God" (*Clergy Stuff*). And I want to be really clear here: This isn't something God condones nor does the church of Jesus Christ- though some who have been or are in my position have abused their power. We are reading this biblical story today because we continue to journey through the Old Testament, using the Narrative Lectionary. It is important to hear about the ways that our ancestors in faith encountered God throughout history- the good and the bad. I also acknowledge that these passages contain violent and disturbing material. Today's story needs to be read in order to grapple with the reality that people in power often misuse/abuse their position to take what is not theirs in ways that cannot be defended or excused. And yet, I want for you to do what you need to do to take care of yourselves during this time of worship. October is Domestic violence awareness month and before we continue with today's biblical story, I'd like to hold a moment of silent prayer, remembering those who have been victims of sexual violence and assault; those who have been victims of crimes or experienced a family member killed by homicide. Today we recognize those lifted up in prayer as a part of the Biblical story, our story, and most especially God's story. Loving and Healing God, we offer you our prayers this day. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

We last left the story of the Israelites at the end of the Book of Joshua, where they committed to serve the Lord and only the Lord- no more idol worship. That is, until we get to Judges. The people- once again- are unfaithful to God. Doesn't this sound like a broken record? Then in Ruth, we are shown what it looks like to- once again- keep God's covenant. Meanwhile God raises up some judges to watch over the people- Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. But then one day the elders of the Israelites came to Samuel and asked for a king to reign over Israel. Every other powerful nation had one, why shouldn't they?! Samuel disagreed, asking why they needed a king? God is their king. But the people said they needed a strong leader who could lead them into battle. Samuel gave a speech warning them that a king would only bring trouble and oppression. But God told Samuel to do as they asked and to find them a king. So Samuel finds Saul and he didn't work out so well. So God commanded Samuel to find another king. This time it was David- the youngest son of Jesse- who tended his father's sheep and wooed the flock to sleep by playing his harp and singing beautifully. Saul didn't know it at the time that Samuel had found another king, as David was really young. But eventually David took over, and Saul came to love David as much as he loved his own son, Jonathan. David and Jonathan were really close, and David married Saul's daughter, Michal, who was one of many wives for David. But the most famous of David's wives was Bathsheba. That's where we pick up with today's story upon David and Bathsheba's first meeting. In the 1951 Gregory Peck/Susan Hayward film, Bathsheba and David have a consensual adulterous affair. In the 1985 Richard Gere King David film, Bathsheba appears before King

David in court claiming abuse by her husband, Uriah, before becoming involved with David. Interesting how neither film wants to tell the biblical version of the story- preferring to tell of an illicit and steamy romance. The truth is that David's yielding to temptation led to an escalating series of cover-ups, culminating in his command to have Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed. Before we listen to the biblical story, let us **PRAY. READ 2 Samuel 11:1-5; 26-27.**

It's spring and David's army is off again to war. But where is David? He's back home in his palace in Jerusalem. However, a king is supposed to be with his soldiers in battle. David is both physically and spiritually not where he is supposed to be. "In his withdrawal from frontline participations with his people in battle, we see a shadow withdrawing from the page" (Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*). What is that saying about idle time and the devil? "Verb by verb, we watch David remove himself from compassionate listening and personal intimacy with others to a position outside and above others, giving orders, exercising power" (Peterson). Thus begins the ways David's loss of a sense of responsibility to the community leads him to violate Bathsheba, Uriah, and the will of God. There is a lot of complexity in the biblical portrayal of David. He is both a great biblical hero and yet a deeply flawed human being. It makes me wonder whether we have lost the capacity for recognizing such complexity today? It also makes me wonder where is Bathsheba's voice? "When viewed from the perspective of Israel's history that the books of Samuel reflect, its focus on the man, on David, the King, is understandable. But in doing so, Bathsheba, the woman in the

story, the victim on multiple counts, gets overlooked. She becomes incidental to the story and over time even gets a bad rap from interpreters” (Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, WP). This is a story of adultery at best and rape at worst. And the only words we’re told that Bathsheba says is, “I’m pregnant” (v. 5)- and that was by a messenger. It is not OK that this is all we hear from Bathsheba. Bathsheba is in her rightful place- minding her own business, as she takes her ritual bath required by law after her period. “As a woman in her society, Bathsheba was powerless to call David to account for what he had done to her. This goes on the list of questions I have for God. Whether recorded or not, God saw what had been done to Bathsheba. She too was a child of God, with all the rights and privileges of God’s favor. And any word that speaks of divine justice is directed to all who have been abused and offers them justice whether or not they are called by name. For God seeks justice for all people” (Brooks). God knows what David did, and God did not like it at all.

David’s abuse of power more than fulfills Samuel’s prediction of how the Israelite king will act (1 Sam. 8:10-17). And of course we still see this behavior among those with power today. Those who abuse their positions in a variety of ways- from politicians to celebrities to bosses to religious leaders. But instead of everyone turning a blind eye to this abuse of power, David has someone who holds him accountable for his actions. God sends the prophet Nathan to David because what David had done was “evil in the Lord’s eyes” (2 Sam. 11:27). Let us continue to listen to God’s word for us this day as we pick up in chapter 12, verses 1-9 (2 Sam.). **READ.**

Notice that Nathan calls out the murder of Uriah but not the adultery or rape that took place with Bathsheba and that disturbs me. I'm having a hard time finding any good news in today's story. Perhaps a lament is the best response here? I wonder if the only good news of the story is that we have the story. It wasn't dumped or edited out. It reveals the warts of power and the danger of privilege. It's a tragic, cautionary tale with no winners and no good news. Maybe the only good news is in some hope that God does hold people accountable for their sins? Maybe the only good news is that we can try and do better or that oppressive systems become exposed and history is hopefully not repeated. There is always a place for truth and justice with God. It's like the Soil Collection ceremony and worship service we had yesterday at Village Anglican Church for the Community Remembrance Project (CRP), which is part of the Equal Justice Initiative that Bryan Stevenson began. The CRP is an opportunity to remember those who were lynched in and around Greenville. Soil is collected near the site of the lynchings and then poured into jars and sent to Montgomery, Alabama to be housed at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. During this past year, we have remembered four men lynched in Greenville because of the color of their skin and yesterday we remembered the last of the four: Ira Johnson, who was kidnapped from his jail cell in downtown Greenville and taken to Old Buncombe Rd. and shot over 500 times in the back by a mob of hundreds of white men, while hanging from a tree. He was killed before a trial could take place- no judge or jury ever heard his case. The pain and sorrow were palpable as we gathered in the sanctuary yesterday. Even though Ira's unjust death

happened over 127 years ago, we remembered it like it was today. It's necessary to confront racial terror because in order for there to be healing, we must recognize the pain of the past. It's necessary to tell the truth of what happened because we need more hope, mercy, justice, and truth. I was reminded yesterday that "formalizing a space for memory, reflection, and grieving can help victims 'move beyond anger and a sense of powerlessness" (EJI). It's necessary to remember because as the poet Maya Angelou says, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not to be lived again (*On the Pulse of Morning*).

Today's "story takes a gospel turn when David's pastor, Nathan, shows up and preaches him a sermon" (Peterson). Everyone needs a Nathan in their life. Remember Michael Jackson's song, *Man In the Mirror? If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change*. This was David's Man in the Mirror moment- "You are the man," Nathan says, dropping the mic on him. Nathan holds up the mirror for David to see himself, and Nathan does this in a parable. "God has receded into the background, and David has stepped up front and center. The more David, the less God. The less David is paying attention to God, the more he's acting if he were god, pulling Bathsheba into the orbit of his will so that she's dependent upon him; acting like a god in relation to Uriah and unjustly ending his life" (Peterson). Who holds up the mirror for you? "We are so blind to our own faults and quick to judge the faults of others. We blame everyone and everything else" (*Spill The Beans*). Our propensity to sin and then cover that up with more sin means we need a trusted

someone in our life with the permission to call us out. And then we need to be ready to hear it. Or maybe we're being called to be a Nathan speaking truth to power. And both aspects are difficult just as this story is difficult.

Only God can restore our brokenness. I have a really good friend from seminary and her name is Anne. She is one my Nathans. She often holds up a mirror for me. She is also an advocate for many Bathshebas. Anne also does what is called found art. What that means is that she, like our own Russ Reed and Christy Lee Peeks Fowler, takes disregarded things on the side of the road, what we would call trash and throw away, and turns them into beautiful pieces of art. A few weeks ago we were driving down the road together and she yelled, "Glass! Stop the car! Seriously. Pull over." Confused, I pulled the car over into a parking lot, and she proceeded to get out and collect the broken glass from a car accident that was on the side of a busy highway. She is always collecting broken things and restoring them- recreating/repurposing them into beautiful works of art- like a mosaic or resin poured over the broken pieces to make them whole. That's the way God restores all of creation in our brokenness. Perhaps in order for us to see- we, too, have to look in the mirror and change/repent- otherwise we stay broken pieces. Just like Nathan leaves David to ponder the story and its meaning, so we, too, are left to ponder the knowledge and consequences of our own sin- in our broken hallelujahs. In the midst of the pondering, I do find it hopeful that "the wife of Uriah the Hittite"- Bathsheba- is named in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's Gospel alongside other suffering women

whose names are listed in the lineage of the One who himself would suffer and die and then rise again. Only God...Amen.