

OPENING:

In 1952, the television sitcom *I Love Lucy* famously refused to say the word “pregnant” to describe the show’s main character, Lucy Ricardo, who was expecting the arrival of her first child. That decision, and that the actors (real-life husband and wife, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez) slept in separate beds for their onscreen relationship, seems quite quaint by today’s standards.

Our Old Testament lesson from 2nd Samuel does not suffer that same problem. The story of David and Bathsheba paints a vivid picture of all the low points that life has to offer, the fall of a great king, the hypocrisy between public and private behavior, and the brutality by which men can treat others, particularly women. This week and last week’s lessons, which test the propriety of even the most gifted lay reader, belong to the more modern era of graphic and sensational television. But, for better or worse, they speak to the realities of the human condition, and its tendency towards violence, deceit, and great wrong.

Whenever anyone suggests that the Bible or the Church, cannot speak to the relevant issues going on in a society, one need only point them to 2nd Samuel Chapters 11 and 12. It’s all there, in painful detail.

TEXT FROM LAST WEEK:

TO RECAP: In last week’s lesson, David sees Bathsheba, the wife of one of his warriors, Uriah the Hittite, bathing naked on the veranda while Uriah is off at war. He summons her, he “lay with her.”¹ To cover up his misdeed, David tries to get Uriah to return home and sleep with Bathsheba in order for the husband to establish paternity. Out of a sense of duty, Uriah does not. So David then sends Uriah back off to battle, arranging so that he will be in the forefront of the fighting and be killed.

It is one of the more sordid tales in a book that includes many of that type. We would like to distance ourselves from these uncomfortable stories, relegate them to the past and its patriarchal culture. But even a cursory glance at the behavior of

¹ 2nd Samuel 11.4

such public figures as former North Carolina Senator and Presidential Candidate, John Edwards, or former Army General and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, David Petraeus, suggests that we might be here all day if we were to list the ways in which modern leaders approximate the behavior of King David. Furthermore, the entire #MeToo movement is a litany of moments where Men in position of power abuse that power, and then receive their comeuppance.

TEXT THIS WEEK:

How David receives his comeuppance is our story today. At the start, Uriah is dead, Bathsheba has become David's wife, and things look like they are in the clear for David.

But Nathan shows up. Israel tends to have kings that are a mixture of despicable and praiseworthy. Those kings tend to have prophets which call them to count on their behavior in no uncertain terms. Nathan is David's prophet. Nathan tells him, in one pretty obvious parable, about a man who has been given everything, but insists on taking more, simply because he can. David, utterly tone deaf, cannot understand the point of this parable.

Nathan helps him out. He declares, in a powerful and concise condemnation: "You are the man." David wants no part of the whole thing, but Nathan, and God, won't let him off the hook. "You are the man."

This was the man who had slayed Goliath, became Israel's king, taken the Ark into the city of Jerusalem, and danced with Yahweh.... This was that man, and he was also the man, in Nathan's indictment, guilty of coveting, of adultery, and of murder.

BATHSHEBA SYNDROME:

How could David have been both men, the same man?

David's fall from grace has birthed a term in the business world called the "Bathsheba Syndrome."² The Bathsheba Syndrome is the situation in which success inflates leaders' ego such that they make ethical mistakes. Without a team of advisors (colleagues, subordinates, family members, chaplains, consultants, etc.)

²Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longenecker. 1993. "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders." *Journal of Business Ethics*. <http://ksuweb.kennesaw.edu/~uzimmerm/Notes/Ludwig+Longenecker,%20The%20Bathsheba%20Syndrome.pdf>

willing and capable of keeping them honest, the Bathsheba Syndrome sets in. In our story, it is present as David orders his general Joab to send Uriah to his death, and Joab, the prototypical loyal functionary, merely follows orders without questioning the immorality of the act.

The Bathsheba Syndrome is a catchy name and good lesson to draw from this story.. The takeaway from this story is thus a behavioral principle, something that can be solved via the tenets of human management. In this way of thinking, it was a structural flaw in the command module of Israelite kingship that can be repaired with a set of best practices, maybe a committee or 3, better oversight and communication.

But that sanitizes the story and leaves something missing.

BATHSHEBA:

Stunningly absent, despite the title of the Syndrome itself, is any characterization of Bathsheba herself. In fact, in our lesson today, she goes unmentioned by her actual name. Only referred to as the “Wife of Uriah,” she is hidden, in the story, subsumed into David’s orbit. After mourning the death of her husband, she becomes his wife and property.

At best, Bathsheba becomes a bit player to advance the plot of the male protagonist, at worse she is an object of male fantasy who suffers without adequate care or concern shown by the author, or by us.

Indeed, oftentimes, in literature and more frequently in art, Bathsheba morphs into the seductress of David, bewitching David into his actions. Such a reading, unsupported by the text, allows us to move on from Bathsheba and back to David, the chosen one who captivates us so.

But what were Bathsheba’s hopes and dreams, her fears and anxieties?

Bathsheba has a singular phrase in our story: “I am pregnant”—a statement pregnant with meaning and consequences for all. By speaking, Bathsheba did a brave thing, trapped in an unspeakable situation against her will, she had the bravery to speak the truth. She had the courage to assert her worth and meaning even as the very act threatened her.

This is necessary because the devil tries to convince us that we are alone, that we have no Advocate, outside of our loneliness. In our story, we see a model, through the actions of Bathsheba and Nathan, for the Church, in our own time, for how to bring the resources of the community to bear to share her grief and pain.

It becomes our responsibility, like it became Nathan's to amplify the voice on behalf of the wounded and afraid, and to trouble the conscience of the powerful

CONCLUSION

David had tried to erase Bathsheba not to mention Uriah. He had assumed, like powerful sexual predators, that his position and status would protect him.

David had sought to erase Bathsheba but, in the next act of the story, Bathsheba gains power as David weakens in old age.³ Like so many mothers in the Bible, she will ferociously advocate for the status of her children, in this case asserting her son Solomon's right to the throne.

David had tried to erase her, but her triumph in mothering Solomon, whose descendants would rule Israel for centuries, guaranteed Bathsheba a victory in this sordid tale of gain and loss.

Who knows if she would have traded it for all the pain that initiated it?

One final note: David had tried to erase her but, ultimately, no one would ever forget her. God would have the last word, as is always the case, and a mother's love would triumph.

In a remarkable inclusion, Bathsheba shows up in the genealogy for Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, included with all the fathers of so and so, is, "mother (who) had been Uriah's wife."⁴ A painful and intriguing entry for all involved, but an honest one.

She would be the ancestor of the man who declared:

"I am the bread of life"—one who redefines what power and belonging mean. A new king who can re-create pain and suffering into new creation.

~ **AMEN**

³ 1 Kings 1.28-31

⁴ Matthew 1.6.