

072323 – Sermon – Bathsheba

I look around this sanctuary on a hot summer Sunday and see people dressed appropriately for the heat and humidity that we experience in a church without air conditioning – women in sleeveless dresses or tops, people in shorts and sandals... I know I ditch the pantyhose, along with shoes and socks, as soon as summer weather peeks around the corner and we can be pretty sure that there will be no more snow on the ground. It only makes sense. We do what we can to be comfortable – and no one bats an eye. In fact, the ones that make us take a second look are the Muslim women we see walking down the street here in Bells Corners, wearing long dark robes and head coverings or the Amish women on vacation downtown wearing long dresses, heavy stockings and sturdy shoes. They must be so hot! It's all about tradition and modesty though. I have encountered quite a few women dressed this way around the pool where we vacation in Mexico and I wonder what they think of us walking by in bathing suits. It's all about tradition – and modesty... I get that, but I can also tell you that their husbands and children are not all covered up. These women sit and watch their families enjoying the refreshing water of the pool, dressed in bathing suits just like ours. It seems unfair, doesn't it?... But, for the most part, these women have accepted this modest and traditional way of dressing as part of their expression of faith. It would have been the same for women of biblical times. We've moved a long way from those days and customs... haven't we?

Just this past May, a dress code blitz in an Ottawa high school made the headlines. Students – girls, in particular – were called out of class because their shorts weren't long enough, not what the teachers considered "mid-thigh". The girls were embarrassed and felt intimidated, even degraded. Not one of the pictures I saw of these girls were what I would consider inappropriate – and I am pretty conservative in that regard, I think. It escalated into a student demonstration with boys holding signs that read "Why just the girls?"

We might think that the discomfort and embarrassment of these girls is just a small thing that was blown up – but we also know that it is an indication that, despite all the gains women have made over the past few decades, there is still that underlying sense that women are the ones who have to take responsibility for protecting themselves against unwanted sexual advances, and that they are the ones to blame for any sexual violence that happens to them.

"What were you wearing?"

"Why did you go there?"

"How much did you have to drink?"

Or...

"She was really into it."

"She never told me to stop."

"She has always been a flirt... or a tease... or promiscuous"

“She was asking for it.”

It’s an age-old problem, one that I hope is moving toward a solution in these days where it isn’t swept under the rug, where women feel empowered to speak up and say, “It happened to me too and it’s not ok.” It’s not a new problem. It goes back centuries and that is evident, even in our sacred scriptures.

And so, today we have an example of just one of these stories, the story of Bathsheba.

Our reading this morning begins “In the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle...” and yet we find King David, not on a battlefield with his men but safe at home in his palace. He takes an evening stroll on his rooftop – a great place to catch the cool evening air after a hot day. He sees a beautiful woman bathing on a rooftop below. This was also a usual occurrence in that place and time. We are told that she is doing a purifying ritual required at the end of her menstrual cycle. A rooftop was generally a private place in those times – especially in the darkness of evening; a place away from the eyes of the household. It was likely the place where the cistern of rainwater stood – but, unfortunately, Bathsheba’s roof was not as high as her neighbour, the king’s.

David doesn’t turn away to give her privacy, he stays to watch. How could he help it after all? She’s beautiful!

When he asks about her identity, he hears that she is not just some unknown neighbourhood girl – she is Eliam’s daughter and Uriah’s wife. Her father fought for David in battle and her husband is one of his most decorated soldiers. They are men in David’s inner circle. This woman is very well connected and he has been made clearly aware of it. His desire outweighs his common sense though and he tells them to bring her to him.

What could she do? He is the king! Could she refuse? There is an imbalance of power here that makes her extremely vulnerable to abuse, an imbalance much bigger than the ones we decry today a teacher or coach to a student, a city councillor to an assistant... this is a king commanding the presence of a subject, a woman who, in those days, had few rights.

The story doesn’t tell us that he wooed her or offered her dinner or gave her gifts. He sent for her... she came... he lay with her... and she returned home. We don’t hear whether she was pleased by the honour or fought back, in fact, we don’t hear anything about her or from her at all, other than the message, “I’m pregnant.”

Well, this causes a problem for David. Her husband, Uriah, is off fighting David’s battles. She clearly wasn’t pregnant when he left, so what will happen when he comes home and finds her in this state? Will she tell him that she was raped by the king? What will this do to David’s reputation as a good and wise ruler?

So, he calls Uriah home from the front. They have a conversation – not about Bathsheba, but about the state of the war. He sends him home for the night and also sends a gift to his house. But Uriah doesn't go home. He honours the fact that his men are all still at the front, far from their homes, sleeping on the ground and he refuses to take advantage of this respite when the men he depends on are not allowed the same.

Well, that little plan didn't work! So, David invites him over again the next night. He fills him full of wine and sends him home drunk. And still, Uriah spends the night on his doorstep and then returns to the front.

Now what? David uses his great power once again. He has his general send Uriah to the front line, into a situation where the fighting is the fiercest, and then to pull back the rest of the troops, leaving him there unprotected. The general obeys the command of his king and Uriah is massacred along with some of his men.

David allows some time for Bathsheba to mourn the death of her husband and then has her brought to him once again. He took her as a wife and she bore him a son.

Problem solved! But God was not happy! Once again, we don't hear whether Bathsheba is happy... God rants and rages against David. This anointed one, the one chosen by God to lead the people has really messed up. God sends the prophet Nathan to David to make him see just what a horrible thing he has done. Nathan tells him a parable:

“There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Hmmm... look in the mirror, David.

Nathan lays out before him, all the things David did to upset God - the God who saved David from King Saul and gave him everything – Saul's kingdom, all of Judea and Israel, his household, even his wives and yet it wasn't enough, David had to not only take Uriah's wife but have this innocent man killed. David finally gets it and realizes he has sinned. God decides to spare him his life but tells him that this child Bathsheba has borne will not be so lucky. And so, the infant

son of Bathsheba is struck with an illness. David is a mess. He pleads with God, he dresses in sack cloth, he refuses to eat... but one week later...

Here's what the scripture tells us happened next: (2 Samuel 12)

¹⁹ David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied, "he is dead."

²⁰ Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

²¹ His attendants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!"

²² He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' ²³ But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

²⁴ Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon."

Once again, we don't hear Bathsheba's voice. I think we can imagine how she was feeling... She has certainly been through an awful lot – a rape, a pregnancy, the murder of her husband to cover it up, and now the death of that baby. She shares God's punishment for David – deserved or not. At least we hear that David finally decided to comfort her...

But, it seems to me that his sudden recovery, his ability to go back to his regular – very privileged - life, sounds a bit like, "Phew! Thank goodness that's over!" He comforts Bathsheba, but we don't hear that he apologizes to her or even admits to her that his actions have completely disrupted her life. I guess it's all ok... she gets to be a queen after all... no harm done really. And David was a good guy, the best really, the one chosen by God to lead the kingdom. He made one bad mistake, for sure, but he was allowed to carry on afterwards to fulfil his potential. And that new baby – Solomon – becomes a wise and revered king after David. It's a happy ending...

Is it any wonder that women over the centuries, and still today, who are victims of sexual abuse have their voices silenced? Is it any wonder that they are blamed for that abuse? This is a story in our sacred scriptures, in the book we look to for guidance in living our lives. After all, Bathsheba was beautiful, and she was right there, how could David help himself?

Is the answer in the way our neighbours from more conservative faith traditions insist on modesty of dress for women and girls? Will making sure our high school girls wear shorts that

cover their thighs, or blouses that cover their shoulders solve the issue of violence against women? Are the communities that practice these rules safer for females?

Bathsheba goes on to recover, it seems. In later stories, she gains a voice. She, together with Nathan, ensures that her son Solomon becomes the heir to David's throne rather than an older brother by one of David's other wives. King Solomon, during his reign, listens to her and treats her with great respect... and it is this line of David that leads to the birth of Jesus in Matthew's genealogy.

Bathsheba is one of the five women named in that genealogy along with Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary but her name is listed only as "the wife of Uriah", ensuring that her story is recognized and that we can see that the lineage of Jesus includes people with an infamous backstory.

It's not the only such story in the Bible; there are many. They aren't usually the stories we choose to read on a Sunday morning. It would be simple to say that this is a story to remind us of the issues of the status of women, or of sexual violence against women. Both are certainly true. These are issues that we are still working to address today, but I think we can take the lessons one step further and consider how other marginalized groups are victimized in our society by people of power and privilege – children, those living in poverty, visible minorities, the indigenous population, persons with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants and refugees, transient agriculture workers from Mexico and other countries, those living in places where big North American companies move in to mine resources or cut down trees... the list is long. All these people are vulnerable to the might of those in government and corporate power, but also to the power held by many of us simply by virtue of being white, middle-class, and living in a wealthy and stable country. Even if we don't set out to abuse that privilege and the power that comes with it, it is easy to make decisions and choices without realizing the impact they might have on the lives of others.

Bathsheba was able to heal and to find her voice. A large part of that healing may have come from being allowed to grieve and to lament, from having that time ritually set aside to do just that. Part of that healing may have come from having an ally like Nathan who heard that lament, who listened and came to support her. Can we learn from their example?

We need to do more than protect the vulnerable, more than having them cover up with longer dresses or shorts, or hiding who they are, more than keeping them silent and out of sight. We need to find ways to empower them to find their voices by listening to their lament... by hearing, and believing, and uncovering their stories... and by supporting them as they strive to find their voices and their rightful place in the world.

May we have the courage to make it be so. Amen.