



From the Pulpit: January 28, 2024

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time—ATS Mental Health

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

II Samuel 11:1–17, 26–27, 12:15B, 18a

Jesus’ Grandmothers, IV: Bathsheba

During the season of Epiphany, we’re preaching a sermon series called *Jesus’ Grandmothers*. In Matthew’s royal but checkered pedigree of Jesus’ ancestors in the first chapter or his gospel, Matthew tells us about 42 grandfathers of Jesus and four grandmothers, five if you count Mother Mary herself. So there is Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and this morning, Bathsheba.

Why those four, only those four, that’s a good question. I think it’s because Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba foreshadow Mother Mary herself and her eccentric son in their edgy sketchy relationship to the patriarchy. They are on the fringe of society and are warning us what Mother Mary will look like.

At the apex of his power and popularity, King David has an affair with a married woman. David already has more wives than the most ambitious Mormon, but it’s not enough.

It is the spring of the year, the season when, the historian tells us, self-respecting kings go out to battle. David sends General Joab out to battle the neighboring Canaanites, but David the historian tells us without further editorial content, stays in Jerusalem, safe and sound.

David is such a slug in this story. Late one afternoon, he even takes a nap. Upon arising, David, restless perhaps with nothing to do, shuffles up to the roof of the palace and spies a comely neighbor bathing on the roof of her own house a couple of doors away. He sends for her. They have an affair. She becomes pregnant.

For a long, long time, when Hebrew Bible scholars approached this story, they asked the question “Who seduces whom?” They asked whether the historian implanted a deliberate ambiguity into the story. Is this an accidental voyeurism, or is it possible that Bathsheba engineered this chance encounter? They wondered whether Bathsheba was more knowing agent than passive victim in this story. Maybe she knew that her spa was in eyesight of the palace.

“This is King David remember, and what David wants, David gets. This is not a mutual infidelity but a royal rape.”

In a droll, clipped aside, the historian tells us, “the woman was very beautiful.” Did she know the enthralling power of her beauty? Maybe she’s a social and political climber who wants to live in the palace with the

most prosperous, propertied, powerful plutocrat in the history of Israel. The text even hints that Bathsheba knows what time of the month it is. Did she calculate the chance of successful conception so that her offspring would instantly become a prince or princess?

Those kinds of questions to the text of course, are no longer acceptable. If we learned anything from Harvey Weinstein, Jeff Epstein, and Matt Lauer, it is that there should never be a sexual relationship in a power differential. Doctors should never couple up with patients, nor therapists with clients, nor teachers with students, nor bosses with employees, as many errant celebrities and transgressive CEO’s have found out to their dismay.

This is King David remember, and what David wants, David gets. This is not a mutual infidelity but a royal rape. When the king says “How about it?” it is not her option to say “No thank you, not today.”

Did I mention that Bathsheba was married to one of David’s most loyal soldiers? His name is Uriah. David’s in big trouble. As omnipotent as he practically is in his royal power, even the king is not supposed to sleep with the wife of a soldier who is off risking life and limb defending the kingdom from foreign foes. This is Lesson #1 at Commander-in-Chief School. They teach you this on your first day at West Point: don’t sleep with your soldiers’ wives.

David’s in big trouble. But he has a clever idea. He invites Uriah back from the front for a little R&R back in the friendly confines of Jerusalem. He thinks that the first thing Uriah will do after a long sabbatical from the marriage bed is go straight home to take advantage of his conjugal rights. Then when the child is born nine months later maybe nobody will notice that he looks a lot more like David than like Uriah.

But Uriah is a ram-rod straight Marine. He is completely devoted to the Corps. He doesn’t even go home, but pitches his soldier’s modest pup tent instead on David’s front lawn. It would be wrong to enjoy oneself so sweetly while one’s comrades are out at the front in muddy foxholes within enemy arrow range.

When this almost harmless ploy turns up barren, pardon the pun, David resorts to an uglier contrivance. He tells Joab to make Uriah the point man of a dangerous advance and then withdraw the line at the worst possible moment, leaving Uriah and a few unsuspecting comrades to face the enemy assault, alone and abandoned. Do you remember Willem Dafoe as Sergeant Elias in Oliver Stone’s brilliant film *Platoon*? Well no matter. Go see it.

David’s infatuation with this married woman is quite literally a fatal attraction. In one of history’s more malignant royal stratagems and shameful abuses of power, Uriah and several other innocent Israeli soldiers are killed. And the dying doesn’t end there. God is so incensed with the deviousness of God’s favorite king ever that God takes the life of David and Bathsheba’s innocent infant son.

“Maybe on the simplest and most transparent level it’s nothing more than a morality tale.”

Well you know the rest of the story. David takes Bathsheba as his wife, they have another son, and this one they name Solomon, who not only grows up to be the wisest, richest, most powerful king in Hebrew history, but also becomes, 25 generations later, the great-great-great-great-times 25-grandfather of the Messiah. Why does Matthew mention Bathsheba? What’s he trying to tell us?

Maybe on the simplest and most transparent level it’s nothing more than a morality tale. Maybe Matthew alludes so subtly in his Jesus genealogy to the story of David and Bathsheba to remind us that every illicit union is a fatal attraction, quite literally. Maybe nobody dies most of the time, at least not literally, but something always dies. Love dies, trust dies, your self-respect will be gone forever; it is unlikely to experience any resurrection whatsoever.

Sometimes, usually a marriage dies, sometimes a family dies, or at least whatever meaning the word ‘family’ once had. Can I say that to you, and will you hear it as a word of grace from someone in whose office this wreckage of infidelity often washes up? It’s so heart-breaking. You just cannot take the measure of the sorrow such betrayal always elicits. Did you know that 30% of Tinder users are already married?

Marriages can shipwreck on many a jagged shoal. She keeps a cold bed. Every day he looks right through her as if she weren’t even there. He’s so in love with his work he’s none left over for her. We married too young, before we were adults really. We were still children. Sometimes we marry before we know who and what we’re going to become. Sometimes we marry before we know who and what *she’s* going to become.

A while back Kathy and I were browsing in Greenwich's version of The Book Stall, a quaint little bookstore right around the corner from the church. Kathy picks up the new novel by Anne Tyler. This was a long time ago. It's called *The Amateur Marriage*, and my lovely, loving, beloved wife of 22 years at the time pokes me in the ribs and says, "Oh look Bill, Anne Tyler wrote a book about us." She laughed. I laughed. It was a joke. Mostly.

The Amateur Marriage. It's such a great title because it describes every marriage there ever was. Every marriage is amateur, isn't it? There are no professionals. We all make it up as we go along. But let me tell you something, I know from personal experience that two amateurs can make beautiful things. If they keep trying.

So maybe Matthew mentions David and Bathsheba as a simple morality tale. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. Honor your marriage vows, for God's sake. But actually, I think there is a profounder reason Matthew mentions Bathsheba in Jesus' royal but checkered pedigree. I think Matthew wants to foreshadow yet another of the themes we'll see so vividly dramatized once Jesus himself finally steps onto history's stage. I think Matthew means to show us that out of fatal attraction God brings natal redemption. The offspring of this illicit union several generations down the years is called Jesus, Joshua in Hebrew, which means "he will save his people from their sins."

Natal redemption from fatal attraction. I think Matthew means to tell us that there is always a second chance, that death is never final, that there is always the possibility of new birth. Despite all the meanness we purpose and all the betrayal we practice and all the death we do, God always brings new birth into the world and bends history to God's spectacular destiny.

What Jesus' royal but checkered pedigree means is that history happens at this coincidence, this confluence, this meeting, of twisted human connivance and stealthy divine providence, so that despite all the turns and meanderings and dead-ends of human history, God comes up with Jesus, the most perfect life that's ever been lived. God uses what is mixed and fixes what is broken and heals what is sick and points the lost in the right direction. And we find that out most definitively in the life of Jesus himself.

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Maybe there's somebody here who in a moment of self-forgetfulness or half a lifetime of stubborn error has vandalized the innocent or wrecked everything he loved. Maybe there are broken hearts and fractured relationships and abject failures at your feet. Don't give up. Start again. There's always a second chance. Isn't that what the cross of Christ means? That God can take whatever is wrecked and awry with human contrivance and turn it instead by stealthy grace into splendid purpose?

As someone has said, the Good News is that "we do not flail in a void, the universe has a final floor, we are upheld by sheer grace, we stand on Christ the Solid Rock, all other ground is sinking sand."¹

1 Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 59, 285.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Lord, God with us,
Everlasting, Eternal,
Alpha and Omega,
Beginning and End,
We turn to you.
We long for you.
We feel welcomed in,
a place at your table,
embraced, no matter who we are,
or where we are on life's journey.
You shake us free of what burdens us,
what holds us down,
and your vast extraordinary Spirit,
comes to dwell within and alongside us.

For this we give you thanks.
For this we are most joyful.
For this we offer thanks and praise.

In our living, in our working,
in our friendships, in our holy solitude,
let there be something mysterious, beautiful,
something at which to wonder, to delight,
to relish and cherish.

We pause in gratitude for the new friendship,
for the old friendship, for the one we admire,
for the one whose love is more and deeper
than we could ever have imagined.

For friends who form a sure foundation,
colleagues who light the way
with a spirit of hope,
neighbors who bring by a meal
in times of trouble,
loved ones who do not hesitate
to hop in the car,
or catch a plane at moment's notice.

Let us be there for one another, God.
Let us be there, an incremental love that grows,
rises like bread, exponential,
so that we might live with full hearts.

For the parts of this life
that feel too hard to bear,
the pain that is too much,
the fear that we just can't shake,
enfold us in a new kind of love,
a Christ-centered love,
where that vision and sparkle
of heaven descends to earth,
and a possibility unfolds
amid myriad impossibilities.

God, that is what we need.
Possibility. In our longing.
In our clenching, clutching, grasping.
In our long days and longer nights.
We need your possibilities to rise up,
and new life to emerge.

We need that same spirit
in the most troubled corners of our world,
known and unknown,
in Russia, in Ukraine,
in Israel, in Gaza, in Palestine,
in Somalia, in Nigeria,
give rest to the spark of conflict,
and without a doubt let your reign of peace
fall upon this, your earth, these your people.
For our own local governments,
and for our own nation,
we pray, that there might be wisdom and creativity.

Be and abide with us, holy God, now and always,
and hear us as we pray the prayer
Jesus teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

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