

10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
July 29, 2018
2 Samuel 11:1-15

Bathsheba's Story: #MeToo

In the name of the living, loving God. Amen.

The appearance of this text from 2 Samuel at a time when news reports are inundated with stories of powerful men abusing and victimizing women offers both an opportunity and a challenge for the faithful preacher.

This was the opening statement this week on one of my favorite preaching sites. By the time I read it, I had already spent a week praying and wrestling with this text. Indeed, *this* faithful preacher has decided to take the opportunity and the challenge of wading into some difficult topics. It is time and as a church we can no longer afford to ignore and sweep these stories under the rug. So, for the next 15 minutes or so, I ask you please to listen. Listen to what might be uncomfortable, what might be a relief, what might be difficult to hear. Listen because it's important and its part of our common journey.

While I was at General Convention, what became known as the "uncomfortable convention," we took on a number of these types of issues and talked about them. We dedicated an entire evening to what was called a Listening Session in response to the #MeToo movement.

The #MeToo movement began 10 years ago when a woman named Tarana Burke came up with this idea for women of color to share their stories of being harassed, assaulted, and abused. #MeToo is the response that others make to let someone know they aren't alone. Burke says this is the power of empathy to support people. When you find out you aren't alone, when you share your story and know that someone else hears you and sees you, it gives people access to a healing journey. The #MeToo movement aims to do accomplish two primary things; to eradicate sexual violence against all people and to bring about radical community healing.

At General Convention, I heard the comment that the church is finally responding to this secular movement, when we really ought to have been the ones prophetically leading it. Amen! Our churches need to be a safe place for girls and women, for all children and all people. At long last, we are beginning to make that a priority. Amen!

We make this a priority and take action by passing resolutions which make the "rules" of the church better, consequences enforced, and abuse no longer tolerated. We do this by attending and promoting the Safeguarding trainings and putting into place best practices which prevent and stop abuse. We do this by confronting and talking about the stories of abuse and harassment in our own lives and in our scripture.

And so, today, we are going to talk about the day King David raped Bathsheba. This is a long and complicated story, worthy of a whole series of sermons, and so, I will do my best to summarize what has been explained away, justified, and rationalized for too long in order to make it less uncomfortable. This is the way it goes with family secrets, shameful incidents covered up, lies to make it more palatable so we don't have to deal with the awful truth.

We know Bathsheba through her relationships with men, not in her own right. This is fairly typical for scripture. We can assume she is a Hittite. We know she is married. And through this incident, she becomes the ninth woman sexually linked to David in scripture.

Bathsheba is married to Uriah, King David's strike-force officer in battle. It is spring, a time when kings go off to war. In this culture, conflict and violence were normalized, scheduled, and expected. And yet, King David is not fighting with his men. He is home in his castle and courts.

David sees Bathsheba naked, ritually cleansing herself, from his high vantage point in the castle and sends a group of men to "take" her. As Wilda Gafney writes, "To come when beckoned by the king does not imply consent" (214). She did not have the option to say no. By walking with them, Bathsheba retains her dignity **and** it is not consent. Gafney goes on to write, "Rape is an abuse of power that can include relational and positional power, in addition to physical power" (215). Bathsheba makes the best of a violent and terrifying situation.

When this occurs, Bathsheba's husband Uriah is at war and she is home alone. She does not have any children yet. Eventually, Bathsheba learns she has been impregnated by this rape and sends word to David. David's response to this news is to call Uriah back from battle in an attempt to get him to return home to sleep with his wife thus covering up his sin. That way he could pass off the pregnancy on Uriah. But Uriah refuses to go home to the comfort of his wife while his men are in the fields of battle. This was his death sentence. David sends him back to battle and makes sure he does not survive. While David doesn't murder Uriah by his own hand, David is responsible for Uriah's death.

An anonymous messenger tells Bathsheba of her husband's death on the battlefield. And when her mourning period is over, she is taken like a possession to the castle. There is no proposal and again there is no consent. She joins a home which David already shares with seven other women plus their children. It is important to hear their names. Bathsheba joins Abigail, Ahinoam, Maacah, Aaggith, Abital, Eglah, and Michal who has been locked away. Some of these women came with attendants and midwives.

Bathsheba arrives the survivor of sexual trauma, recently widowed, pregnant, and alone.

We can't help but wonder. Does she have any friends or confidants? Does she have contact with the other women and children or is she isolated? Is it a friendly companionship among the women or hostile? We will never know.

And then, she gives birth to a son who dies. Scripture sees this as a penalty for David's sin. Bathsheba remains in the castle with David and goes on to bear him more children. She has four sons that we know of, including Solomon, and we assume daughters who are not deemed worthy of mention. Her grief is acknowledged for losing a child, but not for being the victim of rape.

As a childless widow, she could have been turned out on the street or reduced to being a sex worker, but she remained a royal woman in David's court. And still, the text never admits that a crime has been committed against her. The closest it comes is in chapter 12 verse one which reads, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

This is Bathsheba's #MeToo story and it's about time we heard it. Yes, it's uncomfortable. Yes, it's awful. And it's part of our story.

Telling these stories and adding a #MeToo gives people access to a healing journey. That's what happened last year when the movement gained momentum on social media and it seemed as if every woman you knew posted #MeToo.

The statistics are terrifying. 1 in 4 women have been sexually assaulted or raped. When we broaden the categories to include sexual harassment, 81% of women and 43% of men have been victimized with the disabled being most at risk. In college, I remember hearing that statistic for the first time, 1 in 4. I came to know that it was certainly true in my circle of friends. At that point in time, I was one of the lucky ones. I was not sexually assaulted until I was in my late 20s. I am now part of that statistic as are many of you sitting here today.

We join Bathsheba in saying #MeToo. And the power in that is giving people access to a healing journey. When we tell Bathsheba's story and empathize with it, it helps us to empathize with one another and to support one another as we come to know and hear each other's stories – including the joys, the pains, and the sorrows. By refusing to ignore David's gross violation of power, we begin to bring about radical communal healing and take one step towards eradicating sexual violence in our own day.

These stories aren't just from long ago and far away when it was "normal." These things happen today in our own community and it isn't acceptable. God calls us to respect the dignity of every human being. As we seek to live and move more and more in God's Kingdom, we must eradicate sexual violence from our families, schools, churches, and communities. It is part of our calling and part of our prophetic witness to this world.

Today, I ask that you hear Bathsheba's story. Hear her pain and her witness. For it is her #MeToo story and I pray that it empowers us to be people of empathy and a community of support.

Gafney, Wilda. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.