

Gather the Fragments

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As I studied the text from II Samuel this week, I found it interesting to note that the Biblical narrative that leads up to the story of David and Bathsheba has painted a very favorable portrait of King David. The king of Israel has led his people to countless victories over their enemies. He has welcomed and cared for the crippled Mephibosheth, the last remaining member of the house of Saul. He has sought to follow the will of Yahweh, offering prayers of thanksgiving and commitment. The young boy who defeated the undefeatable Philistine has grown into a strong, righteous king.

And yet, right from the start of chapter 11, something is not right. Though this is spring, the time of the year when kings lead their armies to battle, Israel's king sits in Jerusalem as his people head off to carry out the siege of Rammah without him. It appears that King David has decided to exercise some executive privilege, opting to remain safely at home. From the roof of his palace, David spies a beautiful woman bathing, and though he soon learns that she is the wife of one of his soldiers, he is not deterred.

A more literal translation of what follows gives an even harsher, sharper picture than we find in most modern readings: "David sent messengers, and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her." The strong, short verb phrases highlight the violence of the action. David *takes* Bathsheba, using the full force of his sovereign power to get what he wants. Bathsheba has no voice and no choice but to obey the king. Many commentators have wondered, I think appropriately, whether "adultery" is really a strong enough word for the abuse of power that takes place here.

David's egregious misuse of his power does not end with his actions towards Bathsheba. When Bathsheba sends word that she is pregnant, the king summons Uriah back from the siege, so that he will sleep with Bathsheba and obscure the true parentage of the child in her womb. But Uriah's loyalty to his commander and solidarity with his fellow soldiers foils the king's plans, and even a night of drinking can't convince the warrior to return to his wife. And so, in one last desperate exertion of his power, David sends Uriah back to the battlefield with instructions for his murder.

As I began reflecting on the lectionary texts this week, I quickly decided that the story of David and Bathsheba really couldn't be any more unrelated to the miraculous narrative we encounter in today's gospel reading. I was pleased to discover that there were others who shared my opinion. Author Daniel Harrell puts it especially well in a Christian Century article from three years ago. "I appreciate the lectionary's knack for relating Old and New Testament texts," he writes, "but I have no idea why King David's adultery is coupled with Jesus feeding the 5,000." Amen, brother. What exactly is the connection here? What are we supposed to take away from this bizarre pairing?

Harrell goes on then to suggest that perhaps the disconnect is precisely the point. The central character in John's gospel uses power in a very different way from King David. Jesus' power transforms a few fishes and loaves of barley bread into a bounteous feast for a hungry multitude. Jesus' power appears as a calming, reassuring, guiding presence to disciples caught in stormy waters. Jesus' power is power that gives selflessly, offering comfort and hope. The gospel writer is actually quite explicit in noting the distinctiveness of Jesus' power. "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king," says John, "he withdrew again to the mountain

by himself.” Israel has been waiting for a powerful leader who will rise up and deliver the people from Roman occupation, smiting their enemies with an iron hand. They have been waiting for a second David. But that is not the way of Jesus. Jesus, we know, will be “king” in a markedly different sense.

And so perhaps these stories are meant to offer us two contrasting narratives, two very different models of kingship and power. And perhaps the question that follows then is, “which one do we choose?” Or, more pointedly, “which one are we choosing?” The answer to that question seems rather disheartening. We need only turn to the news in our communities, across our nation and throughout the world to see the latest re-tellings of the David and Bathsheba story, the most recent examples of human power abused and misused. Executives manipulate their companies’ finances for their own profit, taking advantage of customers and employees. Clergy and other institutional leaders use their clout and authority to cover-up sexual indiscretions and engage in abusive behaviors. Politicians accept bribes in exchange for policies that protect corporations and leave the poor to fend for themselves.

And these are just the stories from the headlines. I know I have to remind myself, lest I too quickly absolve myself of any kinship to David, that CEOs, priests and senators are not the only ones who can misuse their power. When I think about what I’ve done with the power and privilege I enjoy as a citizen of the richest country on Earth, when I consider the effect my way of life has had on the poor and hungry across our nation and world, when I reflect on the negative role power has sometimes played in my own relationships with friends, co-workers, classmates – well, I think for many of us, the story of David and Bathsheba is uncomfortably familiar.

Perhaps that helps to explain why our Christian tradition has often sought to downplay the David and Bathsheba story. There have been many justifications for David's behavior. He must have been truly in love with Bathsheba, or perhaps Uriah was a cruel and inattentive husband, or perhaps Bathsheba was intentionally seducing David. Even the writers of scripture seem to have had some reservations about including this disturbing tale within the Old Testament narrative. The writer of Chronicles, in fact, completely omits the episode from his account of King David's life. And we can certainly understand why. This is not the type of behavior one wants to see in God's anointed king. It's not the type of behavior we want to recognize in ourselves. But there the story remains, a permanent reminder of our own abuses of power, of our own failures to follow Jesus' way.

And as Daniel Harrell suggests, perhaps that's the point. But I think there's something more for us in these texts. As I read and reread the passage from II Samuel this week, I found myself drawn to the second half of the story, to the way in which David responds to the devastating news that Bathsheba has conceived. There is something so fundamentally, undeniably human in his behavior – in the frantic attempts to cover-up, to conceal, to hide all traces of transgression. David may be a powerful king using his power to cover up his abuses. But it seems to me that he's also another human being caught by his own mistakes and shortcomings, desperate to maintain the illusion that he has it all together, afraid of what might happen if his failures, his misdeeds, and his brokenness are exposed. David has messed up, and he finds himself suddenly face-to-face with the reality of his brokenness.

As a young student at M.M. Seylar Elementary School, I was exceptionally good at a lot of things. I worked hard, excelled in all the major class subjects and was developing musical talents in cello and singing. My behavior in the classroom was impeccable, and my teachers expressed their appreciation for my positive contributions to the classroom. I was a model elementary school student. But one day in third grade, I found myself sitting alone in an empty classroom during recess, working on a quiz I had missed due to a sick day. As I flipped to the back side of the document, I was shocked to realize that I remembered nothing about the Cherokee Indian tribe, to which the entire second half of the quiz was devoted. Panic set in as I encountered question after question that I had no idea how to answer. And then, two desks down from where I was sitting, I spotted the ultimate temptation – the Native American tribe packet we had been given a week ago, lying open on what I was quite certain was the page I needed. Well, you can guess how the story goes. Ten minutes later, I was locked in the bathroom at the back of the classroom, bawling my eyes out, horrified by what I'd done, terrified of being found out, crying hot tears of failure and inadequacy.

Of course, the shame and despair of a childhood cheating incident probably can't quite compare with the complex web of emotions that must have surrounded David in our story from II Samuel. And I don't presume to know what all David felt and thought as the situation devolved. But perhaps we, who live and work in a society that idolizes competence, success, perfection, we who value the trust, respect and affirmation we receive from those around us, who sometimes feel as though we can hardly meet the countless demands of everyday life, much less walk deliberately in the way of Jesus – perhaps we can resonate with the impulse to hide – and hide from – our failings.

Perhaps we know what it's like to come suddenly face-to-face with the reality of our inadequacies, our mistakes. To feel at times hopelessly broken, fractured, fragmented beneath a smooth, regal veneer.

There is an interesting common detail in each of the four gospels' accounts of the feeding of the 5,000. After the bread and fish have been multiplied and distributed to the hungry crowd that has gathered around Jesus, the disciples go out amongst the people and collect in baskets the bits and pieces of bread that are leftover from the feast. But what comes as a mere afterthought in the other gospel accounts is given special emphasis in John's re-telling of the story. John notes that it is Jesus who initiates this collection of the broken bits, the useless scraps that lie on the ground, mere shadows of the feast that was. "Gather up the fragments," says Jesus, "so that nothing may be lost." And with these broken pieces of bread, the disciples fill 12 whole baskets.

In her reflection on the gospel text, artist and pastor Jan L. Richardson invites us to consider this a holy and deeply significant action. "Call it the persistence of wonder, or the stubbornness of the miraculous: how Christ casts his circle around the fragments, will not loose his hold on what is broken and in pieces. How he gathers them up: a sign of the wholeness he can see; a foretaste of the banquet to come."

At the end of our passage from II Samuel, King David's life lies in pieces. Gone is the image of the brave, benevolent king who led his people to victory, who cared for Mephibosheth, who danced joyfully in the presence of God. What remains is a mere shadow of that image, a broken man who has forced himself on a married woman and ordered the murder of one of his own warriors. But though our reading ends here, David's story does not. In the end, God gathers up the fragments of David's life,

bringing them together as pieces of a new wholeness that will be shaped and molded by God. Though the child in Bathsheba's womb will die, another son will be born to her, and he will lead Israel after David. God will keep covenant with David throughout all the hardships he is yet to face. And centuries down the road, a child will be born from David's lineage who will be the Savior of the World, the Prince of Peace, and he will cast his circle around all fragmented lives as a sign of the wholeness he can see.

As we remember the story of David and Bathsheba, as we confess our own complicity in its re-telling and face our failures to emulate the Prince of Peace, may we also remember the One who sees in the fragments the promise of a banquet to come. May we live openly, without fear, and entrust our fragments to the one who works in us and through us, bringing wholeness to the world.