

“Rediscovering Bathsheba”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*2 Samuel 11:1-15, 26-27*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Who here has seen the reality TV show “The Masked Singer”? Yeah, me neither. I’m only talking about it because it came up on NPR’s quiz show “Wait Wait... Don’t Tell Me.” Because, I’m a nerd. Anyway, it’s this show that makes celebrities sing while wearing head-to-toe costumes, and people have to guess who they are. This year we’ve seen a grandpa monster with a walker on tennis balls, a life-size Russian doll, a psychedelic chameleon, and something called a robopine, which I gather is a cross between a robot and a porcupine.

“Wait Wait... Don’t Tell Me” was talking about the show because they had the winner of the first season on their program: rapper T-Pain. They asked him how a multiple-Grammy-winning, platinum music star, who could do anything, ended up sweating in a crazy costume. He said, well, first of all, he may have been slightly inebriated when they described the show to him. Also, he figured his voice was so distinctive, he’d be off after the first episode. So he told them to give him the silliest costume they had. What did he care? He was only going to have to do this one time. The day before the show starts they tell him that’s not how it works; even if the judges figure out who he is, he still has to stay on the show. And so now he’s trapped. And no one knew who he was. It was a complete mystery, because everyone associates him with auto-tune; no one knew what a great singer he was.

I guess sometimes we really don’t know people. We just heard a story about one of the most famous biblical characters. There are hundreds of paintings, movies, books, even sermons about Bathsheba, but what do we know about her?

The Bible tells us almost nothing about her thoughts and feelings. And yet this is the woman who changes the course of Israel’s history. She is one of the few named women in the Hebrew Bible, and is one of just five women named as an ancestor of Jesus.

Today we are going to try to discover Bathsheba’s story. And to do that, we’re going to have to talk about some difficult topics, including violence. If that’s something you don’t want your child to hear, or if you yourself have trauma that might be triggered by this conversation, please step out whenever you need to. Protect yourself.

We first meet Bathsheba on a rooftop, taking a bath. For a moment, she’s happy and doesn’t have to think about how her husband, Uriah, is off fighting a war. We don’t know anything about their relationship—whether they loved each other, whether he was a kind husband or cruel. We do know that he’s a Hittite, a foreigner, and she herself may be foreign as well; it’s suggested that she may be darker skinned.

Many have wondered why she was on the roof bathing. Rabbis explain that she was cleansing herself in accordance with the law of Moses. She was there for God, until a stolen glance from a king took that away. Some interpreters suggest that she was seducing David, which would have been quite the risk on Bathsheba's part; the punishment for adultery was death.

I get it. David is our hero. We don't want to believe what happens next, and so we look to shift the blame. The Book of Chronicles omits the story entirely. Islam traditionally has said it didn't happen. According to the Talmud, descendants of David have tried to deny it as well. Jewish oral tradition said that the story shouldn't be read in public. Christian sermons often speak only of an affair, while pop culture makes it a romance.

It's only here in 2 Samuel where the true story is told. This text is part of the oldest and most verifiable history of David, written by someone who didn't idealize him.

What did she think when the king summoned her? Did she wonder if he had news about her husband? Was he hurt in battle, or had he accomplished some heroic feat and was to be rewarded? Bathsheba trusted David. Her husband was one of his most important soldiers, so was her father; her grandfather might have been one of his advisors.

We don't know what transpired behind those palace walls. The Bible says that David slept with Bathsheba. Was it consensual? This is the great debate. Here's what we do know: David has all the power. It is David who summons her. It's David's soldiers who bring her. She's alone. What was she supposed to do? Resist the king? Fight him off? Who would believe her? She could be killed, or her family could be.

I imagine she was really scared, and thought: this can't be happening. Not him, not David. Paul Carter writes, "King David sent armed guards to bring one of his subjects into his bed—in every civilized country in the world that is considered rape."

It's a word we don't like to use, and yet we can't tell Bathsheba's story without it. Bathsheba was raped. She joins one out of every six women in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

It all hinges on a single word. The Bible says David sent messengers to "take" her. The Hebrew word לָקַח (*lāqah*) appears hundreds of times in Scripture, and most of the time it's perfectly innocent. But it can also be a coercive and violent word, meaning "to seize" or "take captive." It is used to describe rape, such as when Sarai "takes" Hagar, her slave, and "gives" her to Abram, or when Shechem rapes Dinah. The word also shows up multiple times in the story of David's son Amnon and his rape of his sister Tamar—like linguistic echoes of the cyclical nature of violence.

Perhaps most importantly, the Bible treats Bathsheba as innocent and righteous; neither Scripture nor Jewish midrash ever accuse Bathsheba of adultery. A quite stunning fact, given that these are all texts written by men.

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<sup>1</sup> RAINN, Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network

The story next finds Bathsheba trying to wash away the hurt, only to get pregnant, and to have the king cover up the crime, kill her husband, and marry her. We are told she grieves for Uriah, just as she grieves for her child, who gets sick and dies. They don't even let her name the child.

Rachel Adelman writes, "She plays an almost entirely passive role in this chapter and utters only three words (two in Hebrew)."

In those few words, however, we begin to see the awakening of Bathsheba's agency. She goes to David and says, "I am with child." Maybe she's asking for help; maybe she's leveraging power; maybe she's simply looking him in the eye and saying, "You're responsible."

When she has her second child, she is the one, not David, not the court, she is the one who names this child. She, the wounded, names him Solomon from the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning wholeness. As he grows up, she maneuvers her son onto the throne, convincing David to skip over his older sons and name Solomon his heir. She becomes an expert at court intrigue. Jewish midrash describes Bathsheba as being Solomon's most important advisor, guiding him and courageously challenging him when he did things that were wrong, including his treatment of women.

In 1 Kings, it is written, "So Bathsheba went to King Solomon... and the king rose to meet her and bowed down to her. Then he sat on his throne and had a seat brought for the king's mother, and she sat on his right" (2:19). Take a moment to hear that. The victim of a king is now one whom kings bow down to.

Bathsheba has found her voice.

God was there with her, when she was raped, when she cradled her dying child, when she tore her clothes and covered her hair in ashes grieving her husband, when she summoned the courage to confront the king with what he had done, when she jockeyed for power in determining the course of her nation, when she defended her son, when she counseled wisdom and faithfulness. God took what the world meant for evil and raised up grace.

Surely this is what Matthew means when he chooses the women he lists in Jesus' genealogy: Tamar abused by her husbands, Rahab a sex worker, Ruth a foreigner, Bathsheba a victim of violence, and Mary an unwed teenage mother. All women rendered powerless by the world but powerful by God. Women whose faith and tenacity and voice demanded a place at the table. Women who survived and thrived.

So great is the difference between the early Bathsheba and the latter, that some say she can't possibly be the same person. I say this is a story of a woman facing some of the most profound violations and losses, and who rises to define her own life. Through her the Messiah is born. The Messiah, who will one day stop a crowd of men from stoning a woman accused of adultery, who will make disciples of women, who will commission foreign women, who will make the first witnesses to his resurrection women, whose mother will sing of a world turned upside down, the powerless lifted up and the powerful brought down from their thrones. A Messiah who will redefine what it means to be a king, to lead not by coercive power but by love and mercy. A

Messiah who, when looking over the city of Jerusalem, David's city, will describe himself as a mother (Matt. 23:37).

I want you to say her name with me. Say it for the world to hear. Say it for everyone who has ever been hurt so bad they thought this was the end. Say it for the hope that we can come out on the other side of this and rise, rise to new life. Say her name with me: Bathsheba. Bathsheba. Bathsheba. Bathsheba!

She survived, and through her survival, found her voice and shaped a better world. Never forget. **Amen.**