

### **Bathsheba: Considering Power**

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah,  
whose mother was Tamar.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.  
Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.  
Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David the king.  
David was the father of Solomon,  
whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.<sup>1</sup>

Of the five women listed in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, Bathsheba is the only who is not referred to by name. In fact, even though David was the father of Solomon, she's identified by her first husband's name. It's interesting that Tamar isn't described as the former wife of Er. Why is that? By recalling Bathsheba's murdered husband, Matthew seems to be inviting us to remember the whole story, sordid as it is.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning of Bathsheba's saga is found in the books of Samuel. These books focus on three main characters – the prophet Samuel, King Saul, and King David. All three of these people help to transition Israel from a group of tribes ruled by judges into a unified kingdom ruled by King David in Jerusalem.

Saul begins as a perfect candidate for the first king of Israel, but he has deep character flaws which become his downfall. He eventually disqualifies himself by blatantly disobeying God's commands.

The choice of David, an insignificant shepherd boy, as Saul's successor isn't based on his status, but on his radical and humble trust in God. After a long war between the forces loyal to David and the forces loyal to Saul's son, David prevails. He makes Jerusalem the political and religious capital of Israel.

He wants to build a temple in which God's presence can permanently dwell. God's response is: *Thank you for that thought but actually I'm going to build you a house, a dynasty.*<sup>3</sup> God makes a promise to David that from his royal line will come a future king who's going to build God's temple here on earth and set up an eternal kingdom. This is the messianic promise that gets picked up and developed more in the book of Psalms<sup>4</sup> and by the prophets.<sup>5</sup> It's this king who connects back to God's promise to Abraham. The future messianic kingdom will be how God brings blessing to all the nations. The coming of this king is what we celebrate at Christmas.

It's right here in the midst of all this divine blessing that things go horribly wrong. David makes a huge mistake. He has quite a few wives and concubines, has fathered quite a few children, and isn't lacking for companionship. During a time when he should have been on the battlefield with his troops, he is at home in his palace.<sup>6</sup>

From his rooftop one night, a good vantage point from which to see many of the activities going on in the neighborhood, David sees Bathsheba, bathing – something she is required by the laws of Moses to do each month. Bathsheba is married to Uriah, one of David's prize soldiers who is off doing battle. Even after

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:3a, 5-6, *Common English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> This sermon draws heavily from Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 71-90, 157-158.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 7:8-11

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 2, 72, 132, 145

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 11, Ezekiel 31, Zechariah

<sup>6</sup> David and Bathsheba's story is in 2 Samuel 11-12

discovering she is married, David finds Bathsheba, sleeps with her, gets her pregnant, and then tries to cover the whole thing up by having Uriah assassinated and then marrying her.

This is a horrible story of sexual violence and misuse of power. When the king's men show up at her door, Bathsheba doesn't really have a choice about whether she will go with them. And when they take her to King David, regardless of how much force he may or may not use, how much she may or may not protest, she really doesn't have a choice about whether he has sex with her. The power differential is too great for Bathsheba to do anything other than comply.

This part of the story ends with the birth of David and Bathsheba's first son. The narrator states that what David did was evil in the Lord's eyes.<sup>7</sup>

What happens next is unusual for powerful people. When the prophet Nathan confronts David about all of this, he immediately owns up to what he's done. David is broken; he repents. He asks God to forgive him, and God does forgive him. But Bathsheba's trauma doesn't end there. After enduring seven days of tending to her very sick infant, Bathsheba watches her son die. Eventually she gives birth to other sons, including Solomon, but the births of additional children do not remove the pain that comes with losing a child.

We don't hear about Bathsheba again until many years later when Solomon is an adult, David is an old and ailing man, and the once silent, passive Bathsheba is now a bold, powerful woman.

We read about this in the first chapter of Kings. Before reading about what Bathsheba does, let's learn a bit more about the cast of characters involved. According to 2 Samuel 3, King David fathered six sons before moving from Hebron to Jerusalem.

*The first was Amnon, whose mother was Ahinoam.*

*The second son was Kileab, whose mother was Abigail.*

*The third son was Absalom, whose mother was Maacah.*

*The fourth son was Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith.*

*The fifth son was Shephatiah, whose mother was Abital.*

*The sixth son was Ithream, whose mother was Eglah.<sup>8</sup>*

David's sons end up repeating his mistakes of misusing power, but in even more tragic ways. Amnon sexually abuses his half-sister, Tamar. Their brother Absalom finds out about all of this and has Amnon assassinated. Then Absalom hatches a secret plan to oust his father David from power and launches a full-scale rebellion. The rebellion ends when Absalom is murdered. This breaks David's heart, and he laments over the son who tried to kill him. David's last days find him back on his throne as a broken man.

After the death of his elder brothers, Adonijah considers himself the heir-apparent to the throne. He acquires chariots and a large entourage. He consults and obtains the support of both the commander of the army Joab and the influential priest Abiathar. However, Zadok the priest; Benaiah, the king's special guard; and Nathan, the court prophet, side with David. In anticipation of his father's imminent death, Adonijah invites his supporters to a ceremony to announce his claim to the throne. He excludes Solomon and his supporters from the event.<sup>9</sup>

When Nathan hears what is happening, he conspires with Bathsheba to remind David of his promise to make Solomon the next king. This part of the story is found in 1 Kings 1:11-31.

*Nathan said to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, "Did you hear that Adonijah, Haggith's son, has become king, but our master David doesn't know about it? Let me give you some advice on how you and your son Solomon can survive this. Go to King David and say, 'Didn't my master the king swear to your servant, "Your son Solomon will certainly rule after me. He will sit on my throne"? Why then has Adonijah become king?' While you are speaking there with the king, I'll come along and support your words."*

*So Bathsheba went to the king in his bedroom. The king was very old, and Abishag from Shunem was serving the king. Bathsheba bowed down on her face before the king.*

*The king asked, "What do you want?"*

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 11:27

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from 2 Samuel 3:2-5, *New Century Version*

<sup>9</sup> 1 Kings 1:3-10

*She said to him, “Your Majesty, you swore by the LORD your God to your servant, ‘Your son Solomon will certainly rule after me. He will sit on my throne.’ But now, look, Adonijah has become king, and my master the king doesn’t know about it. He has prepared large quantities of oxen, fattened cattle, and lamb. He has invited all the royal princes as well as Abiathar the priest and Joab the general. However, he didn’t invite your servant Solomon. As for you, my master the king, the eyes of all Israel are upon you to tell them who will follow you on the throne of my master the king. When my master the king lies down with his ancestors, then I and my son Solomon will become outlaws.”*

*While she was still speaking with the king, the prophet Nathan arrived. The king was informed, “The prophet Nathan is here.” Then Nathan came in before the king and bowed his face to the ground. He said, “My master the king, you must have said, ‘Adonijah will become king after me and will sit on my throne.’ Indeed, today he went down and prepared oxen, fattened cattle, and lamb in large numbers. He invited all the royal princes, the generals, and Abiathar the priest. They are eating and drinking with him, and they said, ‘Long live King Adonijah!’ Adonijah didn’t invite me, your servant, Zadok the priest, Jehoiada’s son Benaiah, or your servant Solomon. If this message was from my master the king, you didn’t make it known to your servant. Who should follow you on the throne of my master the king?”*

*King David answered, “Bring me Bathsheba.” She came and stood before the king. The king made a solemn pledge and said, “As surely as the LORD lives, who rescued me from every trouble, regarding what I swore to you by the LORD, Israel’s God, ‘Your son Solomon will certainly succeed me; he will sit on the throne after me’—I’ll see that it happens today.”*

*Bathsheba bowed down with her face to the ground. She honored the king and said, “May my master King David live forever!”*

The story of Bathsheba advocating for this son is not as familiar to us as the one about the conception and death of her first son. While the Bathsheba we meet in 2 Samuel is mostly silent and passive, here we meet a woman who speaks up and takes risks. She is bold to go before King David and ask him to tell the people that Solomon should succeed him. For the most part, David seems to listen to the prophet Nathan, but for some reason Nathan thinks it best for Bathsheba to go to David first. Perhaps Nathan perceives that she holds some degree of influence over the king.

Even though she’s making this request on behalf of her beloved child, it’s clear that her own fate is closely linked to Solomon’s. If Adonijah’s kingship is allowed to stand, both she and her son will be in danger. She understands that in promoting her son’s position and power, she is also promoting her own.

In this story, Bathsheba exercises power, but within acceptable confines. She goes to the king because Nathan counsels her to do so. She speaks primarily of what the king himself has said, not of her own desires. And she is there on behalf of her son, not herself. Bathsheba is bold. She is also wise. She knows the rules and uses her power to operate within them.

Later, she uses her power to approach her son, King Solomon, with a request from his defeated brother, Adonijah.<sup>10</sup> Adonijah wants the young woman who attended David in his final days to be his wife. It’s upsetting because the request involves a woman being treated as a piece of property to be negotiated and traded among men. Bathsheba’s attempt to facilitate the requested “transaction” is particularly disturbing, because she knows what it’s like to be treated as property, to be taken by a man because he believes he has a right to do so. We want to see her use her position of power to protect other women.

But we don’t know why she does what she does and how her life experiences have affected her decisions. We don’t know her hopes, her fears, her motivations. She’s a complex person struggling to find her way in a world that, at first, granted her almost no power and then, perhaps, almost too much.

Quoting Joanna Harader from her book, *Expecting Emmanuel*:

*Power can be insidious. Sometimes we use our power intentionally – for good or for ill. Often, we are hesitant to accept the fact that we have any power at all. If our power comes from long-held privilege of race, sex, or class, it can be nearly invisible to us. If we have been in positions of powerlessness in the past, we may not know what power feels like or how to handle it. We may think of power only in terms of David commanding*

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Kings 2:13-25

*his troops and may dismiss power that shows up as Bathsheba asking a favor of her son. As we see from Bathsheba's full story – and from the world around us – power is complicated. The ways we use power affect many people, including ourselves.*<sup>11</sup>

The words we read during the candlelighting at the beginning of the service are part of the angel's visit to Mary as recorded in Luke 1. The angel informs Mary of her part in fulfilling the promise made to David that a future king who comes from his royal line will build God's temple on earth and set up an eternal kingdom, one through whom all nations will be blessed as promised to Abraham.

Hear again that story:

*The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has shown you his grace. Listen! You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of King David, his ancestor. He will rule over the people of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end."*

*Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I am a virgin?"*

*The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. For this reason the baby will be holy and will be called the Son of God."*<sup>12</sup>

The people who were waiting for a long-promised messiah were expecting a prince born in a palace. They were not looking for a baby born in a hut. They were hoping for a conquering hero who would amass a great army and defeat their Roman occupiers. They did not anticipate a man who interacted with people on the margins, taught love for enemies, and died at the hands of their oppressors. This is not the kind of power they were awaiting.

The power of God we celebrate during this season is the opposite of the power wielded by Herod, the king who ruled when Jesus was born. Like David when he first laid eyes on Bathsheba, Herod uses lies and manipulation to get what he wants and protect his power. There are plenty of people in every time and place who use their power to protect themselves while endangering others, to compel people to do things, and to grasp for more and more when they already have more than enough.

Advent invites us to consider power in light of the incarnation, to wonder what it means that the all-powerful God became human and was born as a tiny, vulnerable baby. Advent is a good time for us to think about the power we hold, to consider what responsibilities we bear in using our power in healthy ways, to repent and ask forgiveness for the times we've used our power to cause harm, to recognize the wounds we carry from the times power was used to abuse us, to allow the love we find in our faith community to help heal our wounds, and, if possible, to confront those who hold power over us or over those around us who are most vulnerable.

*May you have the power that is your due and use that power on behalf of the vulnerable – even if the vulnerable one is you.*<sup>13</sup> Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Harader, pp. 86-87.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 1:30-35, *New Century Version*

<sup>13</sup> From "Bathsheba's Blessing," Harader, p. 90.