

Palace Intrigue

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 28, 2025 – Morning worship on *Missions Sunday*
Text: 2 Samuel 11:2-5, 26-27

In 1951 the film *David and Bathsheba* premiered in New York City to rave reviews and ultimately multiple Academy Award nominations. The film starred Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward and was the brainchild of legendary Hollywood producer Darryl Zanuck. Zanuck was enamored of the success of Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* which had premiered in 1949. Both movies were based on works of fiction written by authors who were not biblical scholars but instead lovers of strong characters and powerful storylines. What better place to find these than the Old Testament. Unfortunately, what made for entertaining movies in the midcentury 1950's did absolutely nothing to improve audience understanding of or appreciation for the original biblical texts. This morning our task is to reclaim the well-known story of David and Bathsheba from Hollywood storytellers, listening once again to the text itself as we explore this supposed love story for the ages.

Our text this morning is only a small portion of their story, but it is enough for us to see this is not what it appears to be on the surface. Its story line is familiar – a beautiful young woman catches the eye of an older man who pursues her in spite of her being married. Yet its familiarity is also problematic. Too often when we encounter a story like this one which we think we know, we don't really take the time to notice the details. We don't read carefully enough to see the story behind the story, which is usually where the truth of the situation resides. This is especially true of Bathsheba's story. Hidden behind layers and layers of inuendo in collaboration with centuries of paintings and art work capturing what is considered by some the most important part of the story – Bathsheba's beauty. "Poor King David" is

the subtitle here. How was he supposed to resist such a beautiful woman?

Years and years, centuries and centuries of how this story has been interpreted surely influence how we think about Bathsheba and David. What's interesting to me is that too often we move quickly past this story, loving its supposed romantic overtones even as we realize there is something about it that is more than a little unsettling. Unpacking this highly nuanced and often misunderstood story will be our task this morning. And we will start where we must, with a brief look at King David. A very brief look because David and his time as the King of a united Israel was a pivotal moment in Hebrew and Christian history, filled with personal intrigues, acts of loyalty and courage alongside acts of betrayal, hubris at times out of control and, of course, acts of violence and war. David was the second King, following King Saul. It would take a whole year of sermons to dive deep into David and maybe someday we will, but not today. This morning the only part of David's life I want us to consider are his relationships with women – many, many women. Some of them became his wives, many did not. Let's remember too that King David had many wives at a time, a harem in fact. This was not extraordinary in this time period when marriages were often based in political realities and familial intrigue, seldom what we would think of as love.

David's first wife was Michal, a daughter of King Saul. Theirs was a complicated relationship as David's fortunes and those of King Saul changed. It almost became a love-hate kind of thing. Michal was never the love of David's life, first wife or not. And, she never bore him any children for reasons never made clear. Yahweh's displeasure with the two of them? With her? Or did David simply not want any children with her. A possibility since any children Michal bore would continue the royal line of Saul, something not in David's interest.

David's second wife was Abigail. She was a widow whom David married after her husband Nabal died after an encounter with David

and his army. In a nutshell, David and his army protected the lands and flocks of Nabal from enemies and then when a feast day was approaching, David approached Nabal asking for some sheep and foodstuffs so he could celebrate with his troops. David didn't think this was unreasonable because, after all, he had kept Nabal and all his holdings safe. Nabal disagreed and refused him anything. So David prepared his troops to attack. Abigail heard about this and intercepted David and his army, giving them all they had asked for. When she told her husband what she had done the next day, he got so upset he keeled over and died 10 days later. That's when David courted Abigail and married her, supposedly for her beauty and for her "good sense."

David's third wife was Ahinoam. Not much is known about her and she is only mentioned once in the Scriptures, at the end of the Abigail-Nabal story. There are hints at other points in the text that she was Saul's wife, but no direct references to this. It remains, however, a very interesting development in David's story if she was in fact Saul's wife. It would have been an obvious way for him to continue to consolidate his power as he worked to usurp Saul's kingdom.

Now we come to Bathsheba, the most famous of David's wives even if she was the fourth one. How she came to be David's wife is the biggest reason her story is so well known. We heard a few of the key parts of it in our Scripture reading this morning. She was bathing on her rooftop and King David saw her, found out who she was, went over to her home and had sex with her. She became pregnant. Trying to avoid disgrace and scandal as a result of his actions, David ordered her husband Uriah, a respected and well-liked officer in his army, to come back from the battlefield, assuming Uriah would go in to his wife and therefore, the baby could be assumed to be his. But Uriah didn't go in to his wife upon his return since he felt guilty that he wasn't with his men preparing for battle. David now had a big problem which he solved by ordering the general overseeing the battle to make sure Uriah was in the front lines during the coming attack.

That way he would be killed and David could marry Bathsheba, after a brief time of mourning for her. This is what happened. Only wrinkle with this plan was that Nathan the prophet realized what was going on and, as a prophet of Yahweh, told David that the child to be born would die as a punishment for David's sins. The child was born and died a few days later. Yuck...

How's that for a story??? Talk about palace intrigues! Move over Gilded Age and Downton Abbey! Oh, and by the way, Bathsheba was not David's last wife. He married several more times, all for political reasons. But Bathsheba was, supposedly, always his favorite wife. It's worth noting that the text never once tells us how Bathsheba feels about all this. If we are to believe the story portrayed in Zanuck's 1951 film, David and Bathsheba were in love long before the rooftop bath incident – a romantic notion but not at all accurate according to the Bible. The text does tell us she mourned for Uriah when he fell in battle and she mourned for her baby who died. David, it is reported, especially comforted her over the loss of this child. But then life went on. Bathsheba and David have another child – a son, named Solomon. And, at the time when David's death was approaching, Bathsheba engaged in her own palace intrigues to make sure it was her son Solomon who ascended David's throne even though another should have been next in line. See what I mean? A prime time soap opera for sure!

But now I want us to go back and think about Bathsheba for a bit, not as David's wife or Uriah's wife or even Solomon's mother. I want us to think about Bathsheba in her own right because in her story we see so much of how women are treated still today. Promotional materials for the Zanuck film come right out and name her as a temptress! Not really surprising since she is almost always portrayed in art – paintings, sculptures and even stained glass windows – as just that, a beautiful temptress. In fact, I couldn't even find an artistic image of her that I could use for the altar this morning

because in all of them I could find she was topless. And passive, she's always portrayed as very passive, as if she's just waiting for David – or somebody else – to just come up on the roof and ravish her. So, why do these portrayals matter? Well, if all you know about Bathsheba is what you see in the movies or in art, you will assume she was a temptress – who got what she was asking for when David came to visit. But is this true? Was it ever?

Whether or not she was such a temptress is a point of debate among biblical scholars, one which unsurprisingly falls along predictable lines between conservative orthodoxy and feminist interpretations. That a search for images of Bathsheba, even from such supposedly unbiased sources as Wikipedia, reveal only topless portrayals of her makes clear which view of Bathsheba holds strong. Let's consider for a moment what actually happened in this one pivotal moment when a man sees a beautiful woman and decides he has to have her. Conservative interpretations hold that Bathsheba wanted to be seen in her bath and therefore she had to expect David, or any man seeing her, would react as David did. Feminist scholars point out that Bathsheba bathing on the roof would not have been unusual and she was in fact, according to the text, purifying herself after her menstrual period. By the way, this is included in the text so that it would be clear to anyone reading it that she would have been just entering the most fertile time of her menstrual cycle when David came to her. Also, what she was doing would have been obvious to David and it didn't stop him. So, in essence, Bathsheba is blamed for David's actions even though she had no way of refusing his advances. Was it rape? Scholars still debate this for the simple reason that we still hear in courtrooms when rape trials are litigated: Did she want it? Some scholars argue that of course she did because she was bathing outside on the roof. Others argue that no, this was the custom at the time. And so it goes, for Bathsheba and all women since.

Whatever conclusion you reach on that point, there is still no denying that Bathsheba is the one who paid the price for David's lapse in judgment. She lost a husband she loved. She lost her first child. She entered a harem where she had to jockey for position the rest of her life. Yes, she was Solomon's mother and, as far as some scholars go, that is the only really important thing about Bathsheba. Who she was, really was, is lost to us. She is silent in all the places where she appears in the text. Other than the words she spoke to David as she said, "I am pregnant," her voice is not heard. She literally does not have a voice of her own. And she is not alone in this reality, in her time or in ours or in all the millennia in between. Of that we can be sure. This is why her story is so very important to us today.

I wonder what Bathsheba did say to the people around her, her maid servants and the staff of her small household. We don't even know if she had any family she could have talked to but I still wonder what she would have said to them. Sadly, I'm not sure she would have said anything because, even then as now, she would be fairly certain no one would hear her when she described what happened to her. No one would believe her or, even if they did, they most likely would have counseled her to keep her peace because he was the king! If this happened today, some people would offer her this same advice. The sad truth here is that we really don't like thinking about how vulnerable women really are. We ourselves as women don't like thinking of ourselves that way. But we have to. We are always at risk of attack, verbal, physical, emotional. It shouldn't be this way, but it is. Even more so for women of color and horrifyingly so for trans women. It's a scary world out there and getting scarier every day.

This is why I wanted us to consider Bathsheba's story today. Hers is different from the other women's stories in this sermon series in one simple but not so obvious way. Bathsheba was a victim who remained a victim. Even Yahweh, according to the prophet Nathan at least, cared more about saving David's reputation by letting this ill-

conceived child die, than the impact of all this on Bathsheba. And, unlike Esther and Rahab and Sarah and Eve, Bathsheba remained a victim. She didn't fight back. She mutely dealt with what was happening to her. Was she too afraid to push back against the powers that be? Did she already know that in this situation she really didn't count so why bother? We don't know. But it is worth our noticing that Bathsheba is almost incidental to this story. Who she was as a woman, as a person, truly doesn't matter. We know that because we know so little about her, other than her legendary beauty. That's why her story of palace intrigues is not one I especially like or enjoy.

The truth is, we know her name and we know she was beautiful but that's pretty much all we know about Bathsheba. Dear ones, that is just not enough because everyone, every single person, is so much more than who they appear to be on the surface. Bathsheba's story invites us to consider more intentionally how often it is that we make the effort to get to know people better, to listen to them instead of talking at them? How often do we think to ask questions instead of rushing through conversations? How often do we make the effort to get out of our own heads long enough to see what's going on with other people around us in the moment? Not often enough, I'm guessing.

The good news on this, dear ones, is that this is something we can change. We can make the effort to really see the people we encounter in our lives every day, resisting the temptation to make snap judgements based on how people look or sound. This simple and profound act of being fully present to other people when the opportunity presents itself is probably the most important and effective way we can do our part to bring a little more peace and harmony to this angry, divided world in which we live. Put another way, Bathsheba's story encourages us to see people as God sees them, uniquely themselves and beloved just as they are. This is never easy. It

goes without saying that some folks just sorely try our patience, but still, it's worth a try, don't you think?

That's why in the week ahead, I invite you to make the effort to be fully present in at least one conversation with another person. It can be a family member or not. It can be a friend or a stranger. Who doesn't matter so much as how. Really see them – the worry lines in their faces, the tension they are holding in their bodies, everything about them physically. Listen to what they are saying – or not saying. And here's the thing, even if this interaction only lasts a minute, what might you say to this person to let them know YOU see them. A compliment on some mundane thing or a comment on how tough their job – situation – must be. You get the idea. What I'm asking you to do, dear ones, is to honor Bathsheba and all God's beloved people whose stories are unknown to us by letting whoever know you see them. It doesn't seem like much, I know. But to that person, in that moment, it could be everything. Amen.