

THE SHEPHERD KING: TRANSGRESS LIKE A KING

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2 Samuel 11:1-15

Great novels have great opening lines. With a few well-chosen words, the author establishes the tone for the entirety of their book. Herman Melville begins *Moby-Dick* with the simple statement, “Call me Ishmael.” This informs the reader that the book is going to be about this person, and that Ishmael may or may not be their true name. Jane Austen penned the delightful opening sentence for *Pride and Prejudice* writing, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” George Orwell, in his novel *1984*, writes, “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” We know right away that something in that world is wrong. Clocks don’t strike thirteen.

Our reading for today from the Old Testament begins with a line that should rank among the greats. In 2 Samuel we find these words,

*In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle,
David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him;
they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah.
But David remained at Jerusalem.*

Winter had ended, and, like clockwork, kings would lead their armies out to do battle against neighboring countries whose land looked ripe for the taking, or who had the nerve to encroach upon land that was not their own. In this particular spring, David, king over Israel, sends his officers and men into battle against the Ammonites. But David, the king, stays home. Like clocks striking thirteen, we know something here is wrong. Kings lead their armies. They don’t stay home. It’s like a football coach skipping the away game and telling the offensive coordinator, “You handle it. I’m going fishing.” David abdicates his responsibility and remains in Jerusalem.

And because he stayed in Jerusalem, *it happened*. Yes, the scripture says, *it happened*, and we know what *it* is. Late one afternoon, David rises from his siesta and takes a stroll on the roof of his palace. From that vantage point he has an unobstructed view of a woman in another house bathing. David finds her attractive.

It is at this point that the storyteller shifts gears stripping away the non-essentials of the narrative. What we find now is a concise hammering of verbs like a sledgehammer driving spikes, like a boxer throwing punches. After David spots this woman, we read, “David sends someone to get info on this woman. They report back her name, as well as the name of her father and her husband. David sends people to

get her. The woman comes to him. David lays with her. The woman conceives. She sends a message back to the king informing him, *I am pregnant.*”

There is no romance here. There is no courtship. There are only cruel verbs. David sees something and decides that he wants it. And he takes it. David is not in need of companionship. He already has multiple wives and consorts. The woman's name is Bathsheba. We only hear her name once. She is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah. Uriah happens to be one of David's military officers. Presently, he is at the front fighting the Ammonites. But David does not care. He sees and he wants and he takes because he can. And there is no one to stop him.

The story of David and Bathsheba is not a story about adultery. Adultery is an act between two consenting adults. It is still wrong because it shatters the covenant of marriage. But the participants are willing. In this story, there is no consent. There is only force. This story shows us the shameless abuse of power and privilege by one no less than the king.

You may argue (and many have) that the woman, Bathsheba, should have exerted some control, that she should not have allowed herself to be seen while undressed. But she was in what she assumed to be the sanctity of her own house. It is the king who is spying down from his roof. Just the act of David looking down from the heights of the palace informs us of the power disparity at play here. Furthermore, what Bathsheba was doing when David ogled her was a ritual cleansing after her cycle. She is doing what she is supposed to be doing, while the king, on the other hand, is shirking his duties, taking long naps, and wandering the palace. Bathsheba had done nothing wrong.

Secondly, you might argue why didn't Bathsheba just say no to David? Because that would have been impossible. She could no more say no to David than I could stand in front of a speeding train and stop it. He was king. He had power. She was a woman with little to no power. She was at her home alone (while her husband was at war) when the king's men arrived at her door and inform her the king wants to see her. She cannot refuse. She has to go. As I said, this is about power and its abuse.

When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David now has a situation to contain. He can't let it be known that he has slept with the wife of one of his officers. His action has consequences, so he concocts a plan. He has Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, sent back from the front lines to Jerusalem. David brings him to the palace and casually asks about the war. David then dismisses Uriah and tells him that he should *go home and "wash his feet."* Washing one's feet is an old Hebrew idiom for having relations. David's plan is that if Uriah spends time with his wife, then her pregnancy can be explained away. David will be off the hook.

But Uriah does not go to his home. He sleeps with the king's servants. When David learns of this, he confronts Uriah. Uriah explains that while his fellow soldiers fight and camp in the open, then he should not be enjoying the comforts of his home. It wouldn't be right. The irony, of course, is that David has already been enjoying the comforts of Uriah's home.

The next day, David invites Uriah to a meal and plies him with alcohol. But still, Uriah does not go to his house and his wife. He remains faithful to his men, his country, and his king.

Now, having failed twice to corrupt Uriah, David then composes a letter for his general, Joab. The letter is horrifyingly chilling. The letter instructs Joab to *Set Uriah at the front of the fiercest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die*. David wants Joab to abandon Uriah in the heat of battle and allow him to be killed. It is nothing less than a cold-blooded plan to slaughter Uriah, one who has been so faithful to David and to Israel despite being a foreigner. David hands the sealed letter to Uriah and sends him back to the front unknowingly in possession of his own death sentence. Joab receives the letter and obeys the command and Uriah the Hittite is murdered in battle.

In this story, David becomes the king that God warned about. Back before David and before Saul, God was recognized as king of Israel. But the people went to Samuel and demanded a human king like their neighbors. God warned Samuel that they would not like such a king. A king would take their sons for his army; a king would take the best of their fields to give to his courtiers; a king would take one-tenth of their grain; and so on. And also, God warned, a king will take their daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. This verb *take* is the same word used when we are told, *David sent his men to take Bathsheba from her home*. The king will take. And David takes.

Sadly, this is David. This is the one who for the past month we have lauded in this sermon series as “God’s anointed,” as “the shepherd king.” But here, we discover that David has gone from being a shepherd to being a wolf. And this moment will mark the low point in David’s life—a point from which he will never fully recover.

As I said, this incident is not about adultery. It is about the abuse of power. It is what happens when someone with power and privilege is able to convince themselves that they can scratch any itch they want.

In 2006, the MeToo movement was initiated by a woman named Tarana Burke. Burke’s idea was that women who are the victims of sexual abuse and violence need to know that they are not alone. When other women identify themselves as MeToo—as victims—they demonstrate their support and lend their strength.

Hopefully, the victims will then find the courage to come forward and press charges. This type crime can only exist in darkness.

The MeToo movement gained momentum in 2017 with the numerous and widespread allegations of sexual abuse brought against Harvey Weinstein. As a hugely successful film producer, Weinstein was not unlike a king. He had overseen some the most successful films to come out of Hollywood, films like Good Will Hunting, The English Patient, Pulp Fiction, Shakespeare in Love, the King's Speech, and many more. As a producer, he had the power to make or break careers, and he used this power over a period of decades to harass and abuse young women. In 2017, over 80 allegations were pending against Weinstein, and eventually he was found guilty and sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Weinstein is certainly not alone in his crimes. There are too many others—men (and women) who use their power to prey on those who cannot defend themselves. David's sin lives on in entertainment, business, sports, politics—everywhere.

The story of David is, of course, extreme. None of us will be a monarch; none of us will murder. But still, whoever we are, we should always be cognizant of the power we do wield, of the privilege we do possess. We should always choose to act not as a wolf but as a shepherd protecting, nurturing, and guiding those in our orbit.

I wish I could say that David's sin has gone away. It hasn't. It lives on whenever someone with power takes advantage of someone weaker. But there is hope. David's house continued on with his son Solomon becoming king. David's house would continue down through the generations until God chose to give our world a savior, a savior from the broken house of David. Out of the transgression of David's house, came Jesus the Christ. Despite David's failings, goodness prevailed. Through Jesus, God re-writes the opening lines of our story with hope.

David may not be the shepherd we want, but let us use his story as a reminder of what sort of shepherd we should be, and let us do so in the name of the one who is the true shepherd.

Amen.