

**Dec 18, 22 – Bath-Sheba
Bonni-Belle- Pickard**

Here are my thoughts, Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCdfEeUgbMs>

Heaven Shall Not Wait – StF 701

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHMt3YJHbZE&list=PLfJKMN-CtuWCeWWWKYxMLY_81soj1dufJ&index=30

Longing for light (Christ be our light)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ITDS5B218g&list=PLfJKMN-CtuWCeWWWKYxMLY_81soj1dufJ&index=33

Into the darkness – StF 173

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXKOxub5obc&t=45s>

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Call to worship

Hymn – Come, thou long expected Jesus – StF 169

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuTGA5ke-iY>

Intro to monologue

Monologue – Bath-sheba (2 Samuel 11,12; 1 Kings 1,2)

Hymn Sacred the body – StF 618

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4a7727HX6Jo>

Reflection 1

God, how can we forgive – StF 613 v.1

Intercessions

Let Love Be Real – StF 615

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfRN5dDkymS>

Reflection 2

Benediction

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel – StF 180

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRDjVh2uCMw>

Intro

Welcome to the last of our series of explorations
of the women listed in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.
Over the past three weeks, we've heard the stories of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth,
Told in creative dramatic monologues.
I've been delighted to hear from many of you
As you tell me how these stories have impacted with you and your own stories.

As I've said in the previous weeks,
The telling of these stories is important
Because they inform not just our understanding of who Jesus was
But our understandings of ourselves
And how God is available and interested in each of our lives.
There is no person that God does not love or seek to be in relationship with.

Ours is a God who sees beyond gender and ethnicity
Beyond age and class and power and ability
Ours is a God who made each of us in God's image
For the purpose of loving and respecting all that God has created –
Persons and planets, relationships and legacies –
All created for God's good purposes of love and joy and peace.

In each of these stories, we've heard a dramatic retelling
Of persons who interacted with God in difficult times –
In each of these stories, we've heard voices of women
Whose stories could not be ignored in life or in death,
Stories of persevering against enormous odds of human condition
To bring about the love and joy and justice that God intends.

In each of these stories, we've also reflected on how the legacy of these women
May have influenced and informed Jesus' ministry.
With them, we long for a time when Justice and Peace prevail –
When the life and witness and message of Jesus
Is known and followed in all of human life.
With these women, we look forward to the coming of the Messiah –
And so we join in a favourite Advent hymn:
Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus.

BATH-SHEBA

My name is Bath-Sheba,
Daughter of an Oath
Perhaps you know me by other names:
 Mother of Solomon
 Queen Mother
 Wife of King David
 Wife of Uriah the Hittite

I am all of these and more,
But mostly I am Bath-Sheba,
Daughter of an Oath.

An oath is a powerful thing,
An oath is Word Spoken
 Promise Given
 Trust Fulfilled
Trust is a strange thing
‘Trust in the Lord with all you heart
And lean not on your own understanding!’
Trust I’ve struggled with
Perhaps because of my name
Perhaps because of my story
Trust must be earned –
Slowly I’ve learned to trust the Lord.

Of course, some say that my name ‘Sheba’
Refers to the beautiful and fertile land of Sheba
Perhaps
My husband called me beautiful
My sons, Solomon and Shimea and Shoba and Nathan,
Called me wise.
Yet Wisdom can be trusted
While beauty made me a victim.

I was young then,
The young bride of Uriah the Hittite
A good man, a strong man,
One of King David’s Thirty Famous Soldiers.
Uriah had gone off to fight for King David
and I missed him very much.
I was bathing that day,
The ritual cleansing after my monthly period.
I wanted to keep myself clean and pure
For Uriah
Trusting he would return home from battle,
But never knowing when.
My oath of faithfulness I had given to Uriah.
King David’s palace was above us,

On the eastern ridge of Jerusalem.
King David was very powerful in those days.
(Can one trust power?)
He had not gone to fight in this battle --
He had plenty of men to fight for him.
He also had plenty of women in his palace –
At least three wives and many concubines, they said.

But that afternoon,
He looked down from his palace roof
and saw me bathing in my house.
He saw my beauty
And ignored my oath.
King David sent messengers to bring me to him.
One did not refuse a message for the king,
So, I went with them.
They took me to his bedroom
And there King David raped me.

With his weight on top of me,
All I could think of was my beloved Uriah
Out on another battlefield
And how I would never be clean again.
I would bathe and bathe again and again
But I would never be clean for Uriah again.
David had stolen Bath-Shebat's oath.

David sent me home
When he was finished with me.
As I bathed my body again and again,
My tears bathed my face
And tried in vain to bathe my soul.

I cried out to the Lord for help.
The Torah said that the punishment for adultery
Was death by stoning.
In this case, that was the price for being beautiful
And trusting the king for protection.
I prayed to the Lord
That those in David's palace
Would keep their royal secret.
A king would not be killed for adultery,
Especially a powerful king like David.
As long as I stayed silent,
Perhaps my life would be spared as well,
At least the part of my life
That was still live.

But my body would not remain silent.
My stomach began to churn

My belly began to swell.
Everyone knew Uriah was not at home
And everyone would soon hear my body
Screaming its shame.
My screaming body would shame
My dear Uriah
And there would be no other option
Except that I would be put to death.

I prayed to the Lord for pardon, for help,
And I waited for what would come next.

It was during the waiting
That the Lord sent a gift.
I tell my sons: "A gift from the Lord can be trusted."
The Lord sent to me a long-time family friend,
Nathan, from the royal palace,
Nathan, whose name means 'gift'.
Nathan the prophet,
Trusted by both the king
And the harem --
A gift I knew I could trust as well.

Nathan knew my story.
Nathan knew my Uriah.
Nathan knew David,
And Nathan knew the Lord.
Nathan was not afraid of truth
And he taught me how to trust again.
Nathan helped me see another option:
A woman sentenced to death
Has nothing else to fear.

So, I spoke in words
What my body was screaming.
I sent the king a message.
Two words:
"I'm pregnant."

I waited again after that.
I thought one day I saw Uriah
At the place gate.
But I could not go out in my condition
And I knew Uriah would not come to me
While the rest of the soldiers were fighting.
A strange present from the palace
Arrived at my house soon after --
But Uriah did not arrive.

And then one day,

Nathan sent the message
That Uriah had been killed in battle.
It seems that David had arranged for him
To be killed on the front lines
And Uriah
Had carried his own death warrant
To Joab, the general.

From the depths of my body
Came wave after wave
Of grief and rage.

I wept for the husband I would no longer have
I wept for all the brave righteous men
Fighting senseless wars for kings.
I wept for the innocents
And those treated unjustly.
And I wept for myself
And the child I was carrying.
I wept for days and days
Until there were no more tears

King David then sent for me,
Gathering me in like his harvest,
And he took me for his wife.
The days passed in a blur.
Suddenly I had position and power
As the king's wife,
When all I wanted was quiet
And home with Uriah.

My final months of confinement
Were spent in the harem,
Where the confusion of scheming competition
Mirrored the turmoil
Inside my body and soul.

And then the baby was born.
A son, yes,
But a sickly child
Carrying in his innocent body
All the rage and anger and shame
That had smothered my world
For those past nine moons.
Part of me loved that child fiercely
And another part loathed the sight of him.

I heard -- through the haze -- the story
That Nathan told David,
A story of a 'lamb like a daughter',

Like a 'bath',
And I knew the story was about me,
But it was as if it were
Another person
In another story.

I also heard that King David had repented.
Was that possible:
That a king admit his guilt?

A small part of me knew
That the Lord had heard my prayers --
And my grief and my anger --
And had sent Nathan and his story
As a gift to me
And to women everywhere at every time
Who are used,
Abused,
Discarded.
A part of me was grateful
But the larger part of me was numb,
so much so that
When the baby died
I could think of no reason to live myself.

It was then that David came to comfort me.
In my stupor I sensed that perhaps his grief was real, too.
He had no idea of how to comfort me
Except to lie with me again.
I was too numb to respond
And yet I felt a small bond
Of common humanity between us.

That seed of shared human grief
Grew slowly within me during the following months
Along with the small seed of another baby enlarging my womb.

When our son was born,
David named him Solomon,
Peace.

Though it was my place to name the child
I took his naming as a peace offering.
I think it was the best he could do for me,
And I accepted it as that,
Not Trust, but Peace.

Though David named my son,
I raised my son
And I was determined to raise him in wisdom,

In reverence for the Lord
In respect for all the Lord's people
And their dignity.

The years that followed were difficult ones in the place.
David called for me often enough,
And three more sons I bore him.
As Chief Wife
I had respect in the harem
And Nathan remained my trusted friend.

But David continually overindulged
His older sons, and in the palace,
Rape and murder reigned:
Brother against brother,
Brother against sister.
It was a place of madness and mistrust.
It was hard to raise good children there,
But the Lord gave me strength day by day
To raise my sons in the ways of wisdom,
Wisdom I knew would serve them well
All their days.

As David continued to call for me,
I gradually began to believe
That perhaps he did love me.
I would catch glimpses
Of a very human soul
Secretly longing to be rid
Of the weight of the king's mask.
Sometimes he would read to me
One of his psalms
and I would recite for him
The wisdom proverbs
By mother and grandmothers had taught me.
I believe he began to trust
My womanly wisdom
Even as my youthful beauty faded.

My Solomon, too, David respected.
Once David even swore to me
That Solomon would succeed him to the throne.
I dared not breathe a word of David's oath
To anyone but Nathan.

In time, David's youth faded, too.
And it was well known
That a king without sexual power
Was a king without political power.
When even young and beautiful Abishag

Was unable to spark David's powers,
The palace became a beehive of competition
For the throne.

Living in that blood-thirsty melee of mistrust,
Each one of us know
That to lose the throne
was to chance one's life as well.
Having faced certain death before,
I hardly considered my own risk any longer,
but Solomon's life was different
And indeed, all of Israel deserved
The reign of peace and wisdom that he offered.

Nathan encouraged me,
As he had so many times before.
He went with me to speak to David
About Solomon's succession to the throne.

Through the gift of Nathan, I had learned
How to risk – beyond trust!
How to speak
I knew that the time for me to speak was at hand
I knew how David thought, and what he feared.
I knew that his son Adonijah
Crowning himself king
With all his chariots
And horses
And soldiers
Actually anticipated trouble.
I knew that by ignoring me and my son,
he feared wisdom and truth and peace.

And so I went in David's bedroom.
I reminded King David of his 'oath',
He 'sheba' in the name of the Lord,
His oath that Solomon would be king.
Afterwards Nathan came in
To confirm my story.
Then David renewed his oath
And Solomon became king.

David died soon after,
But the troubles continued.
Adonijah still trying to oust Solomon.
Solomon, despite his reputation for wisdom,
Sometimes, like his father before him,
could only see blood revenge as a solution.
How many generations would it take
For wisdom and peace and trust to prevail?

At Solomon's first wedding,
I present him with a collection of Wisdom sayings:
'To have knowledge
You must first have reverence for the Lord'
'Son, when sinners tempt you
Saying "Let's find someone to kill,"
Don't give in.
Stay away from people like that
Who are always ready to kill.'

I told Solomon to protect and speak up
for people who could not speak for themselves.
I, who had found my voice,
knew how difficult that finding could be,
So, I told him to speak for those without a voice,
To be a righteous judge,
To protect the rights of the poor and needy.

'Trust in the Lord with all your heart.
Never rely on what you think you know.'
Rememberable the Lord in everything you do
And the Lord will show you the right."

I am an old woman now,
And I hear the scribes
Reading the Wisdom Proverbs
Attributed to Solomon:
'Never forget what your mother taught you'
'Charm is deceptive
And beauty disappears,
But a woman who honors the Lord should be praised.
Give her credit for all she does,
She deserves the respect of everyone.'

My name is Bath-Sheba,
Daughter of an Oath.
Word Spoken,
Promise Given.
Still trusting that the Lord will fulfill.
Amen. So be it.

Reflection:

Bath-sheba's story is one of the most difficult in the Bible –
Difficult to hear, difficult to share, difficult to unpack...
Indeed, when I first wrote the monologue, some 25 years ago,
it came after two weeks of sitting in a pew while two successive male preachers
extolled David's virtue!
Especially emphasising the Psalms which emphasise his repentance
And in doing so, absolve him of the responsibility for his sin.
That was hard for me to hear...
As I've shared the story over many years,
people have often told me they haven't known this story
Or they've only heard it from David's perspective...
I don't deny that David later had a change of heart –
That he recognised and repented of the evil he had done.
But I'm also aware that too often we ignore the victim's pain
As we quickly absolve the 'hero' of any lasting responsibility.

Over the past few weeks, several of you have contacted me
To say how much the other stories in this series have affected you –
Some people have told me they'd never heard 'rape' mentioned in a church service before
Or heard anyone speak of a woman's menstrual period in church.
And yet, over half our population is female;
and some statistics claim that 1 in 4 women will experience sexual abuse.
So, whose stories are allowed in churches?

But those who contact me are not only women, but several men as well.
Together we can continue to consider what it means to have power –
Or to be a victim –
Why some in society are given power –
Power originally given to a few
For the purpose of protecting and providing for the many –
But so often, this power has been misused, abused –
By men and by women – against those who are deemed weaker...

So, even as we consider this story today, there will be deliberations:
We hear not just of David and Bath-sheba,
But of Uriah and Nathan and Solomon and Adonijah –
How do we decide which are the heroes or the victims,
The accomplices or negotiators?
How does the perspective of the story teller affect how it is told –
And how it is heard?
Whose story needs a new telling -- or a new hearing?

Perhaps the larger question that intrigued me in this story is this:
Where do grace and forgiveness and reconciliation work into it all?
How do we live at peace with each other AND ensure that justice is honoured?
Throughout Bath-sheba's story and so many more stories in scripture,
We are reminded time and again that true 'peace'
Is not just a matter of staying quiet or out of the way –

Or giving in to unreasonable demands
to keep an abuser satisfied; to keep oneself 'safe' –
True peace is only possible when there is also justice –
And mutual respect for the other.
So the needs of all are acknowledged and met to the best of each's ability –
But no one's needs are seen to be superior than all the others.

We hear this story over and over again in the scriptures.
In this story, Bath-sheba initially gave in to David's demands –
But the *peace* only began once he began to recognise her worth –
And not just as an object to satisfy his sexual desire
But as a person with needs and desires and gifts of her own.

I wonder if Bath-sheba's story – which Jesus would have known –
Influenced his willingness to be touched by the woman who had been bleeding
For 12 years?

Jesus would have known the Proverbs of the Hebrew Bible as well –
How they promoted Wisdom and reverence for all that is Good and Right and True.
His Sermon on the Mount quotes several Proverbs....

I wonder if her understanding of forgiveness might have influenced his
When he hung on the cross and said, "Father, forgive them
For they don't know what they're doing."

[God, how can we forgive – StF 613]

Intercessions

Lord God of all history, our past, our present, our future,
We give you thanks for your presence with us
In good times, in difficult times, in celebrations and in catastrophes.
We thank you for never giving up on us and loving us through the trials of our lives.
We thank you for friends who keep believing in us as well
And keeping us accountable for all that is good and right and true in your sight.

Today we pray especially for those who are in the grip of violence or abuse –
Who can't see a way forward
And may doubt that goodness and truth will prevail.
We pray for those who devote their lives to working for truth and justice –
In big ways and small –
And we pledge ourselves to do whatever is within our power as well.

We pray for situations where injustice reigns –
Where power is used inappropriately
Where greed and self-interest blinds us to your gospel
Of generosity and love of neighbour.

Lord, we have sung of forgiveness and reconciliation –
Give us the courage to keep working for reconciliation –
For speaking up – gently but persistently – when we are faced with wrong.
Give us courage to forgive when we have been wronged
And to ask forgiveness when we have made mistakes.
Remind us that forgiveness – given or received – is not to be a cheap option
But that the forgiveness you showed us
Cost you your life – and brought it back again.

Lord, for all of these prayers and the actions they require,
We ask for your wisdom –
The Wisdom of your Sophia Spirit
Who was known by Bath-sheba and her ancestors
Whose knowledge she passed on to Solomon –
Even when his grasp of Wisdom was incomplete.
Come and be with us, Lord God of all Wisdom and Strength –
Fill us again with the power of your Name,
Through Jesus Christ, who has come and comes again –
Even as we gather to pray together;

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.
[Let Love Be Real – StF 615] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfRN5dDkmys>

And so we come to the end of our season of Advent
And our exploration of the stories of these four women
Whom the Gospel-writer Matthew could not ignore:
Tamar: who knew that 'roaring didn't make right'
And that playing the trickster was one way
For those without power to claim some for themselves...
That Israel's El-Shaddai was a God who had respect for the outcaste
And had blessings to give to all.
Rahab: who balanced gracefully and creatively on the edge of risk and respectability –
Who recognised that the view from the margin
Gave a fuller understanding of what was going on in the centre...
Who used her risky hospitality to work for God's good purposes.
Ruth: who dared to follow the example of the Hebrew woman who was her mother-in-law
And journey with her into the unknown future –
Whose willingness to sacrifice the misery she knew
For the adventure of trusting another woman and that women's God
Ultimately led to blessings for them both;
Whose acquaintance with grief allowed her to fully embrace life.
And finally Bath-sheba: who survived the violence of royal rape.
The murder of her husband, and the chaotic intrigue of a blood-thirsty palace
To ultimately see justice and some semblance of peace restored
Through perseverance of wisdom and reconciliation.

I hope you have felt – as I have – akin with these women of the ancient past –
Women whose stories have impacted on history
And impact us still today.
Their stories have been a gift to me, which I have been privileged to share with you as well.

We've also regarded how these stories became a legacy for Jesus.
I began this series noting that so often our Advent meditations
Have focussed on the topics of Being and Staying Awake,
On watching and waiting for Joy and Peace and Love to reign
On preparing for Jesus' Coming.

But, rather than being abstract concepts, the stories of these women show
How Peace and Joy and Love and Perseverance –
How staying awake to God's presence and God's calling
Was already part of their everyday lives,
Long before Jesus came to earth.

In preparing for these services, one of the hardest aspects (apart from the technical!)
Has been finding appropriate hymns.

Nearly all of the Advent hymns in our hymnbooks *assume* Jesus' coming –
Which means we are often so intent on seeing how it all applies to Jesus
That we ignore what the situations of those who came before his time –
Perhaps we've been too quick to forget
That God has come to God's people throughout all history –
Whenever and wherever they were willing to be aware...

That doesn't mean that we assume they weren't looking for a Messiah –
Some one to come to make 'all the wrong things right' –
I believe each of these women would be absolutely delighted

To know that Jesus and his ministry had emerged from their legacy!
They would have seen in him the embodiment
Of all they had hoped and dreamed and worked and lived for.
But they weren't waiting around for someone else to act in the meantime –
They each saw what needed to be,
And they followed where they heard God calling.

They would have pointed proudly to Jesus saying,
“Do you see that great-great-great-.... Grandson of mine?
He's doing just what we always knew God wanted us to do!”
They, too, would have been devastated as his cruel and unjust death –
But they would also have been exuberantly thrilled with his resurrection –
Because they had seen for themselves
That our God, their God, El-Shaddai of the past and present and the future
Is never fully defeated.
The Goodness and Righteousness and Truth that is God
Will always prevail.

I've told these stories again this Advent in hopes
That their stories will also encourage us to not sit around waiting
For someone else to speak up or act for justice,
For peace, for reconciliation.
God has work for each of us to do,
even within our own sometimes small and personal worlds.
As these women informed Jesus' legacy,
So Jesus life and witness informs ours –
And his abiding Spirit also empowers us to this day
To keep working for all that is Good and Right and True.
So be it with us. Amen.