Bathsheba
Matthew 1:1-6; 2 Sam 11-12:14

In the build up to Advent, we've been looking at the women who appear in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Because what's striking about them is that they're all either of questionable character or dubious background. So why does Matthew include them?

And if that's true of anyone, it's certainly true of Bathsheba. Because we've been seeing how God made a promise, in the aftermath of the Fall, that a seed would come from the woman, who would crush the serpent's head; and he made a promise to Abraham that from him a seed would come who would bless the world. And we've seen how that promise is being narrowed down. First to the tribe of Judah, through Tamar, and then through Rahab, a Canaanite, and then Ruth - a Moabite, to the family of Jesse.

But now, Matthew's genealogy tells us that promise of a serpent-crushing, world-blessing Son, is focusing in on Jesse's son, David.

But how will the seed pass from him? Well, that's what's extraordinary about today's passage, isn't it? Because it tells us is that even in the midst of catastrophic moral failure, God is working out his plan to crush the serpent and bless the world.

So that's what we're going to look at.

The King Who Fails
In his commentary on this passage, Eugene Peterson, says that two names will be forever linked with David: Goliath and Bathsheba. And in both, David is tested. In the first, he's young and of no significance, and he's confronted by a giant. While in the second he's the most powerful of men, confronted by a woman in a bath. In the first, he faces something ugly, in the second something beautiful. In the first, he brings down a giant, but in the second it's him who is brought down.

And it doesn't happen in an instant, does it? Goliath was brought down by a single stone flying like a bullet through the air. But David is brought down step by incremental step.

Verse 1: 'In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab…' The time when kings go out to battle, and David goes… nowhere, he stays home and sends others. And the implication is that David, the great warrior, has grown comfortable. Does he no longer feel the need to prove himself? And he can let others do the fighting?

We're not told, but the implication is that his absence from the *physical* fight is just a symptom of his absence from *another* fight. That if he's grown *physically* flabby it's because he's first grown spiritually and morally flabby. And in skipping one battle, he now faces another even more deadly.

How has he got here? Answer: By doing nothing. Verse 2, 'It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house…' So David the fighter has become David the couch potato. At this moment, his men are feeling the blow of metal on metal while he feels the comfort of cushions. They are killing his enemies and David is killing time. I mean, look at him walking around his rooftop. He's literally going nowhere.

So what's the first step in David's downfall? The neglecting of duty and the failure to serve: 'fighting and serving is for others to do. I've done my time.'

Can you see how dangerous that can be? Because it's not just that the devil makes work for idle hands. It's that the Lord Jesus said, 'it is more blessed to give than to receive.' To serve than be served. Which means you're always going to be happier, more blessed, if you're serving and giving. But pull back from service and think, 'that's for others to do', and you're going to become vulnerable to discontent, to not feeling blessed, and all the temptations that come with that.

So look at David pacing around, and if you've not already, find a place to serve, because it won't just add joy to your life, it'll be a weapon in your fight against sin.

Verse 2: 'He saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful.' So David's master of all he surveys. And of what he surveys, one scene catches his eye. Now, did David go up there to spy on women? Almost certainly not. But having seen her, what does he do? It's what he doesn't do that's so telling isn't it, because he doesn't look away.

Martin Luther said, 'you can't stop a bird landing on your head, but you can stop it building a nest.' And as one commentator puts it, at this moment David is living by sight… not faith.

Isn't that easy to do? Maybe you see what others have, whether that's your friends or advertising, or what others are doing, and you compare it to what you have, and you feel the difference… the difference of discontent. And we're living by sight, not faith.

But if to look, and not look away, was step two in David's downfall, step three is in v3: 'And David sent and inquired about the woman.' So instead of turning away from temptation he's turning into it. And if the fire of desire has been lit, he's now playing with that fire.

Ok, but why is a beautiful woman the arrow that finds the weak spot in his armour? Is it just because he's a man? No. As we'll see, David knows God's law, which includes, a king 'shall not acquire many wives for himself' (Deut 17:17). But David has - wives and concubines. So this issue of desire has been an issue for years. So what's been going on in his heart every time he read or heard read 'a king shall not acquire many wives'? Bit by bit he's been hardening his heart: 'hey, I think these things are matters of interpretation, there are always exceptions, and I'm one of them, and this was written for a different time, and no one understands the pressure I'm under.'

So is it really so surprising that when the next temptation comes, he takes the bait?

And yet, he's given ample warning to back off, isn't he? Verse 3, 'One said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"' How many red flags are there in that one sentence? Number 1: she's another man's wife. Number 2, that man is Uriah *the Hittite*. A foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord who, as king, David is especially charged with protecting.

And not *any* foreigner's wife. Number 3: David, she's *Uriah's* wife. One of your mighty men. One of the men who when you were in danger, and your life was being hunted down, pledged himself to protect you, and die for you. David, this is the wife of one of your most loyal men.

And number 4, she is the daughter of Eliam - another of your mighty men; whose father, we know from elsewhere, is Ahithophel, one of David's closest, most senior advisors.

So this sentence is a sea of red. And yet, v4, 'David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.'

Consider for a moment the chinks in your own armour - where you're most vulnerable. And ask yourself, when you feel desire, and want, for whatever it is growing, do you root it out or let it grow? Do you turn away from temptation or turn into it? Do you pour cold water on the fire or play with the fire? Is your conscience becoming more sensitive or more seared?

David looked… and inquired… and sent… and took. And at each step he could have behaved differently, but he didn't. Because each step would have felt good wouldn't it? He would have felt like a lover, not a sinner. Like an appreciator of beauty not a grubby voyeur. Like a king in control, not a slave to his passions. And if death is stalking him, he felt more alive than ever.

But of course his adultery is not the end of the story, is it? Because did you notice the number of times the word 'sent' is used? Kings should go out to battle, but v1, 'David *sent* Joab.' David sees a beautiful woman and v3, 'David *sent* and inquired.' And despite what he hears, v4, 'David *sent*… and took her.' And later, v6, 'David *sent* word to Joab, "*Send* me Uriah the Hittite."' And afterwards, as he writes Uriah's death sentence, v14, he '*sent* it by the hand of Uriah.'

What does that word 'sent' convey? Power. Control. David's ability to have everyone else do what he wants. And it's that desire to be Lord of his own life, the one who writes the rules for him, that lies at the root of all that follows.

And yet, David is not in the control he thinks, is he. And neither are we. Verse 5, 'And the woman conceived, and *she sent* and told David, "I am pregnant." And later, v12, '*And the Lord sent* Nathan.' So if David, or you and me, are tempted to think 'I'm the master of my own life', circumstances have this way of telling us, 'There's only one supreme sovereign, and it's not you.'

But David now has a problem doesn't he? And being a good politician, he attempts a cover up, and calls Uriah back from the front. But Uriah the foreigner is more faithful than David the king and twice refuses to do what David had done. He sleeps outside rather than sleep with his wife.

So David sends him back to the front, carrying the order that Joab engineer his execution. And so the man who put his life on the line for David, has his life taken by David. And in the process, it's not just Uriah who dies, so does his whole platoon.

James writes, 'Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death' (James 1:15). Do you think he had David in mind when he wrote that? And how someone can shipwreck their life in a few short steps.

And think how many of the 10 Commandments David has broken. Don't covet your neighbours wife. Don't commit adultery. Don't murder. But as Martin Luther pointed out, you only break any of those commandments because you've already broken the first: to have something other than God as your god. Like comfort, control, and sex.

What might it be for you? You see, we can watch David and think, 'that could never happen to me.' But Paul says, 'Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12). So what are you tempted to love and want more than God? And what can make you love him above everything else?

Well, David's only one half of this liaison, isn't he?

The Woman with No Name

No name? She's obviously got a name: v3: "Is not this Bathsheba…?" But look again at Jesus' genealogy: 'And David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*' (Matt 1:6). Tamar and Rahab and Ruth were all named. Why not give Bathsheba her name?

Or look at v26-27: 'When *the wife of Uriah* heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house and she became his wife.'

And that's as near to a royal wedding proclamation that you're going to get: the King is going to marry! Some lucky girl is going to be crowned Queen! And what's her name? 'The wife of Uriah.'

Feminist liberation theologians will tell you, 'ah that's because the Bible's patriarchal, and Bathsheba's reduced to being wife of Uriah and daughter of Eliam, a chattel with no independent existence.' Well, the Bible is patriarchal, that's why we have the Patriarchs. But that's not what's going on here. At least not the way they think.

Because what *is* going on here is that she *was* Uriah's wife. And David may have authored some of the Bible's most heart encouraging texts, but the Bible refuses to brush his sin under the carpet.

So what else do we know about her? Verse 2, she was 'very beautiful.' Now David's descended from Judah, son of famously unattractive Leah. Yet it was Leah and not her beautiful sister Rachel who was chosen to carry the messianic seed. But here it *is* Bathsheba the beautiful who's chosen. So if Matthew's genealogy tells us God chooses the abused in Tamar, and the foreigner in Rahab, and the outcast in Ruth, he also chooses beauty. And Bathsheba *was* beautiful.

And probably not just in looks. Ask yourself, why was she bathing in the first place? Verse 4, 'she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.' So this was not some luxurious, exhibitionist act. This cleansing after her monthly period was intended for God. It's David who corrupts it.

And weeks later she sends the briefest of messages: v5, "I am pregnant" - the only words we hear her say. Which begs the question: why aren't we given any insight into her thinking? Why aren't we told whether she tried to resist David… or not? Whether she's attracted to him or not. And when she laments Uriah's death, but soon after becomes David's wife, how did she feel about that?

It's as if the writer's deliberately silent, isn't it? Because Eliam and Uriah were David's mighty men, his peers. Which means David is old enough to be her father. Talk about an age and power imbalance! And so nothing she says or does, or doesn't say or doesn't do, is going to be used to excuse his sin.

So in calling her the wife of Uriah is Matthew demeaning her? It's the opposite. It's like he is granting her the anonymity of innocence. Because David should have protected her, and her husband, not use her and kill him.

And yet, the fact that she's in the genealogy of Jesus at all tells you, even in the midst of the worst of sins, against God and her, God's at work to bring something even more beautiful to birth through her.

The God who Speaks

You see, if Bathsheba is largely silent, God is not. Chapter 12:1, ‘And the Lord sent Nathan [the prophet] to David. He came to him, and said, to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor.”’

And David is Israel’s highest judge. And Nathan’s bringing him a case to try - of a rich man who took and ate the one little ewe lamb of a poor man. A lamb, v3, that ‘was like a daughter to him.’ What’s the word for daughter in Hebrew? Bat, the first syllable of Bathsheba’s name. Nathan’s point is clear: David has behaved like the rich man: he has robbed and killed and consumed Bathsheba like she was a piece of meat.

Verses 5-6, ‘Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to dies, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold.”

So David knows the Law - that it requires a fourfold repayment of the lamb. But death for stealing a lamb? Where’s he get that from? That’s not in the law. That would be totally disproportionate.

But that’s the point, isn't it? Nathan’s story has found its mark. And just as we saw with Jacob saying of Tamar, ‘Take, burn!’ when you know you’re guilty, and you need to feel righteous, you’ll search for others to point the finger of blame at, and say, ‘they’re the ones who should be executed.’ But as one commentator puts it, ‘David attempts to rid himself of his guilty conscience by passing judgment on someone else, while subconsciously passing judgment on himself.’ Deep down David knows he deserves to die.

At which point Nathan delivers the crushing verdict, v7, “You are the man!” And if he was in any doubt before, David now knows that everything is exposed before the God to whom we must all give account.

And Nathan sets out the consequences. Verses 9-11, “You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword… now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house… You have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife…And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour.”

And if you know the story, David’s son Absalom stages a coup against David, and as part of that, he sleeps with his father’s concubines, in full public view, on this same rooftop. And who put him up to it? Ahithophel, Bathsheba’s grandfather. And he does to David what David did to his granddaughter. As Paul writes, ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom 6:23).

But did you notice David’s response? Verse 13, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And in the days that follow he writes Psalm 51, the unmatched prayer of broken hearted repentance, with not a trace of excuse or self-pity.

So let me ask you, when someone points out something in your life that’s wrong, like a wrong action or attitude, how do you respond? Because we all need Nathans. Friends who aren’t just *willing* but who we *allow* to speak unwelcome truth into our lives.

Because unwelcome or not, it’s David’s repentance that lets in the first ray of hope: v13, “The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you *shall* die.”

Hang on, I thought this was supposed to be a ray of hope. Because, sure, David might live but his baby boy dies. Where's the justice in that? I mean, if the rich man *doesn't* deserve to die, the Law is clear that David does. Because it's not just Uriah, there's a whole platoon of you men lying dead in the battle field because of him. How come he's just forgiven?

He isn't *just* forgiven. Justice will be done. Because if *this* child of David and Bathsheba's dies, another will be born.

The Son Who Triumphs

You see, what's so striking about Jesus' genealogy, is that of all David's wives who could have been chosen, it's through Bathsheba that the serpent-crushing, world-blessing seed will come.

And the death of their first born son is just a foretaste of what's to come with the birth of the ultimate firstborn and their greater Son. Because if their boy pays the price for David's sin, there will come another who will pay the price not just for David's sin, but all our sin.

You see, can you hear Nathan's, "You are the man!" echoing down the years to another court room, and another trial, and another judge, as Pilate presents Jesus and says, "Behold the man!" And yet, David the man is guilty, while Jesus the man, his greatest Son, is innocent. And if David was like a rich man who takes and kills a lamb, Christ becomes the sacrificial lamb slain for all the red flags we ignore, and all the temptation we turn into, and all the commandments we break.

Because David sees beauty and wants it for himself, but Jesus also sees beauty, also in a woman - a woman who, in the days before his death, anoints him with costly perfume, and he says, 'she has done *a beautiful thing* for me' - the beauty of service and sacrifice, before his ultimate and most beautiful sacrifice.

You see, David the king sends the many to their deaths to save himself, but Christ the King gives himself to save the many. David skips the battle, but Jesus throws himself into the most terrible of battles. And if that battle left David beaten and broken, Christ was triumphant. From this deed on, sin and death will stalk David's house; but from Jesus resurrection on life and joy will thrive in his house. Because in the words of the hymn, Christ 'to the fight and to the rescue came.'

So how can God *just* forgive David's sin? He doesn't *just* forgive anything. He forgives it at infinite cost to himself, as His Son, David and Bathsheba's greatest Son carries David's sin and your sin and my sin, and pays for it all. And David takes another man's wife because she's beautiful. But Jesus saw us when we were anything but beautiful, and gave himself to make us beautiful, a washed and radiant bride.

See that - see your true king giving his life for you, and rising in triumph - and it will stir love and loyalty in your heart for him. And like him, you'll want to give yourself in sacrificial love and service not self-indulgence.

So, however broken or slimed by sin you feel, however many red flags you have ignored, however hard your heart has become, however much you are counting the cost of your sin or the sin of others against you, look again at Matthew 1: 'the genealogy of Jesus Christ… David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah the Hittite*.' And know that in Jesus there is forgiveness, and cleansing, and hope. That instead of ashes he gives you a crown of beauty and a robe of righteousness.