

9th Sunday after the Pentecost
July 25, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:1-17

This past week I read two news articles touching on women's simultaneous visibility and invisibility. The first article reported on the fines meted out to each member of the women's Norwegian beach handball team. Because they wore shorts, their uniforms did not comply with the rules of the International Handball Federation, which stipulated women must wear bikini bottoms "'with a close fit and cut on an upward angle toward the top of the leg.' The sides of the bikini bottoms must be no more than four inches."¹ The Federation allows men to wear shorts providing they are not too baggy.

The second article was an interview with the Rev. Paula Stone Williams, who is a transgendered pastor. As a man she was an evangelical pastor and president of a church planting organization. She was fired after coming out as transgendered woman. She spoke about how she "lost" her voice:

"I notice it particularly in the field in which I used to work, which is in starting new churches. The organization I led was one of the best in the nation at what it did. ... But I was in a meeting last year where starting new churches was being discussed and kept trying to contribute. Finally one dear soul said, 'We actually have a person here who wrote an actual book on this subject — that would be Paula.' So I thought, *Okay, now finally they're going to listen.* And still, it was, like, wow: Nope."²

¹ Jenny Gross. **Womens' Handball Players Are Fined for Rejecting Bikini Uniforms.** *The New York Times*. July 20, 2021. Page B10

² K K Ottesen. **Once and Evangelical Pastor, a Transgender Woman is on a Path to Empower Women.** *The Washington Post Magazine*. July 20, 2021

These stories open the story of David and Bathsheba to what J. Cheryl Exum called, “The ‘Rape’ of Bathsheba.”³ Despite Exum’s subtitle, the narrative does not state specifically that David physically raped Bathsheba.

We know the overall shape of the story. As King David walked on his rooftop while his troops were in battle, he saw Bathsheba, “a very beautiful woman,” cleansing herself after her period. He sent a messenger to fetch her and then had intercourse with her. She returned home. She sent word to David, “I am pregnant.” (The only time she spoke.) To cover himself for his adultery, he summoned Joab to bring Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, from the battlefield to have intercourse with Bathsheba. Uriah, too loyal to his troops, refused twice. Finally, David sent him back into battle bearing a message to Joab with the instructions to fall back in battle to leave Uriah exposed. They did. Uriah the Hittite died.

Was it mutual lust that brought David and Bathsheba together? The text does not say. We don’t know if it was seduction as she had no agency in this story. Exum noted, “The denial of subjectivity is an important factor in rape, where the victim is objectified and, indeed, the aim is to destroy her subjectivity.”⁴ Thus, the writer symbolically raped her. By withholding any knowledge of her agency, the writer left her vulnerable to charges of seduction, thus absolving David from initiating this adulterous affair.

The text withholds Bathsheba’s her full identity. It introduces her as “daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite.” While that might seem reasonable, references to Bathsheba in the extended narrative are few. When she found out Uriah was dead, the

³ J. Cheryl Exum. **Fragmented Women Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives**. Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, PA 1993 Page 172

⁴ Ibid. Page 173

writer referred to her as Uriah's wife and didn't use her name. In chapter 12, even after David married her, the writer referred to her as Uriah's wife and did not use her name.

In all these stories, the women were simultaneously visible and invisible. The authorities wanted the Norwegian athletes visible without seeing the bikini requirement was demeaning. When Rev. Williams became visible as a transwoman, her past became invisible. Though Bathsheba was visible to David, the writer made her invisible to us.

Visible and invisible. What we see and what we don't see. What is invisible causes pain.

How we understand scripture shapes how we understand the world. When we have read and heard predominately white men interpret scripture, we may not imagine there is an uncomfortable contrary perspective. Feminist theologians open us to what was previously invisible. Though their perspective may cause discomfort, they present to us a different and sometimes painful reality. Our mutual pain, when we care for and about each other, can lead to true healing, a path to true peace that brings us another step closer to the kingdom of God.