

Least Known, Most Interesting: Bathsheba

2 Samuel 11 (various), Matthew 1:1-16

August 14, 2016

I missed last week's sermon as I was away on vacation, but I listened to it yesterday. Wow. Last week Katherine preached from the book of Judges. As she said, what happened in Israel during the time of the Judges was often used by the Israelite people as a reason why they wanted to be ruled by a King. As is true of most things, we should be careful what we wish for.

The books of First and Second Samuel recount the transition in Israel from Judges to Kings. First there is Saul – who turns out to be a poor number one draft choice. But then comes David. David is the real deal. He seems to be exactly what the people had hoped for in a king. He had the Lord's favor. He was mighty in battle. He was wise. He was just.

But you heard what Katelyn read. David wasn't perfect. It wasn't only that he carried out an affair with Bathsheba. He leveraged his power in the worst way – sending Bathsheba's husband (and his subject) Uriah to the front of the battle line and then ordering his troops to pull back.

To Katherine's point last week, the easy thing would be to focus on the evil that King David committed. Instead, consider Bathsheba – the woman in the center of this maelstrom...and someone with very little power...who submitted to the wishes of a King, witnessed the murder of her husband, and then bore the next King of Israel...a son named Solomon.

It turns out that Bathsheba's story reaches far past the dalliances we are used to reading about on the cover of tabloids. In fact, Bathsheba's story is connected to Jesus' story. Just listen...as I read our second Scripture lesson from the beginning of Matthew's gospel:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and

Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

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The windows in my office look out onto Settler's Cemetery. It's a very old cemetery with gravestones dating from 1776 – 1884. There are some important people buried there: General Thomas Polk and his wife Suzanna are there. General Polk signed the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. He and Suzanna were the great-uncle and aunt of President James K. Polk.

Governor Alexander Nathaniel is buried there. During his two terms in office, Gov. Nathaniel resolved a border dispute that our great state was having with Georgia. Yes, it seems that even in 1806 our fair city of Charlotte was determined that we were not going to be like Atlanta.

In Settler's Cemetery there is a former pastor of our church¹ and his family, there are patriots of the Revolutionary War, and – since this is the South – there are gravestones marked with CSA to memorialize those who fought in our country's Civil War.

I'm not sure what city commission or committee got to decide who was buried in Settler's Cemetery, but I would guess that there are some people who didn't make the cut. Besides the obvious groups of people who are noticeably absent from the cemetery – African Americans and Native Americans, as the cemetery was a product of it's time – I'd be surprised if any Benedict Arnold's are included inside the gates. Somehow "settler" and "turncoat" just don't go together. My guess is that other, more notorious characters in Charlotte's history are buried elsewhere, too.

Most cemeteries are unlike the one I look over from my office window – reserved for only a select crowd. Most cemeteries have a mix of characters that represent the best – and the worst – parts of our history.

That's what is so interesting about the way the gospel of Matthew introduces us to the person of Jesus. When you look at the list, it's easy to get scared off by all the names. A list like that would send a shiver down the spine of any Sunday school student waiting to be called upon by the teacher to read the Scripture out loud. But Matthew starts his gospel this way with a point: Before we meet Jesus and hear about his grace-filled life, Matthew wants to take us on a stroll through Jesus' family graveyard...because it's kind of surprising who we find there.

The preacher Fred Craddock notes that sometimes visiting the family graveyard can be downright embarrassing. Fred tells a story about his sister, who was heavy into genealogies, trying to track down an ancestor named Ruby Craddock. The other Craddocks had come to America by way of Wales, but not Ruby. Eventually, Fred's sister reported, "I found Ruby." "Terrific," Fred said, "what did you find out about her?" "You don't want to know."

¹ Dr. Cyrus Johnston

It seems that Ruby, instead of coming to America with the rest of the Craddocks went to London instead and opened a brothel.

Fred said that he assured his sister that this was another branch of the family tree and to not worry about it.²

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As Matthew takes us through Jesus' family graveyard, the first headstones we see are ones that we would expect: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Judah and Jesse. David and Solomon. But sprinkled in the midst of these monuments to the patriarchs and kings are some other headstones, too.

Matthew makes it a point to mention Rahab. Rahab, in Jesus' family, is like Ruby, in Fred Craddock's family.³

In fact, it's interesting that in an ancient genealogy that lists, as was typical, the generations through the men in the family tree, Matthew is careful to mention women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth...three women whose names bring up awkward feelings among those familiar with their stories for a lot of reasons, including the fact that all of these women were foreigners...people who were, originally, not considered to be included in the chosen people of God. Yet, here they are – mentioned by name in Jesus' family line.

Bathsheba isn't mentioned by name, but she is there, too. You might think the reason Bathsheba's name isn't mentioned is because Matthew wanted to downplay the unpleasant history that led to her connection with King David. If that were true, there would be better ways of downplaying history than referring to Bathsheba as "the wife of Uriah."

Rather than running away from history, Matthew runs towards it. Naming Bathsheba the "wife of Uriah" is a way to call to mind the sins of King David instead of tarnishing the reputation of the woman who King David took to be his wife.

² Craddock, Fred, *Cherry Log Sermons* (p. 1-2).

³ Tip of the hat, again, to Dr. Fred Craddock (*ibid*)

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I think one of the reasons I am so particularly struck by this honest account of Jesus' family tree is because it runs counter to my own natural tendencies.

While I am proud of my own family's history – there are also things I would like for history to forget. The fact that my great-grandfather, an elected official in Virginia, was a strict segregationist. A prevalence of family members with addiction. And mental illness. It's just not my instinct to want to focus on these kinds of headstones that exist in my family graveyard.

This past spring, our church and First United Presbyterian Church continued our tradition of studying Scripture together. First United Presbyterian is a predominately African-American congregation on 7th Street whose members were – at one point in our shared story – worshipping members of this congregation. This year, the class was called “United by Faith, Divided by Race.” One of the teachers, Dr. Julia Robinson – a professor at UNCC – walked us through the history that our congregation has with First United. Like all history, ours is complicated. On the positive side, our church was on the forefront in using Sunday school to increase literacy among African-American children who had little access to other means of education. But from Dr. Robinson I also learned that the reason why the church that has become First United Presbyterian left these premises to start their own congregation was because our Session at the time left them no choice.

What is it for you, I wonder?
What history do you wish you could forget?

Is it from a distant past – captured in a memory that you have locked away because it's just too painful to acknowledge?

Is it from the recent past – still so fresh that that the implications are not yet known?

Is it a divorce?

A bankruptcy?

A selfish decision that hurt someone you love?

A failure that you hope your kids or your spouse don't have to know about or suffer from?

It's tempting to think about the story of our lives as a litany of successes that demonstrate how blessed we are. But that's not life. It's an impossible ideal that will drive us crazy if we let it...and so many of us do.

The truth is that your life, my life, our lives are a mixture of the ideal and the very real. Each of us – and all of us together – share a history that is marked by bouts of faithfulness and sinfulness; the savory and the unsavory; ancestors who make us proud as well as those who make us feel ashamed.

Maybe that's why Matthew made it a point to call to mind the same things about Jesus' history. Because it helps to know that the person whom God sent to save us knew what it was to have a family history that is not marked by perfection, but by grace.

When Matthew wrote his account of the good news of the gospel, he only had the foresight to list the ancestors in Jesus' family graveyard. Just imagine the names that have been added since. All sorts of people and stories are there. All sorts. And there is more room...even for people like us.

Maybe knowing that Jesus shares a history that is complicated can help us acknowledge that ours is, too. And instead of feeling trapped, or ashamed, perhaps we can find freedom in knowing that no matter our past, there is always welcome in the arms of the one who said "come to me, you who are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."