

Telling details: No safe parts in scripture

by [Peter John Santucci](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

"Avoid abstraction," I was told as I prepared to speak to a group of junior high school students. "Seventh graders are still mostly concrete thinkers." The story of David seemed absolutely nonabstract and concrete, so I decided to use it as the basis of my talks.

As I sat down to the task, I imagined myself standing in front of a hundred young people, telling the story of how King Saul's daughter Michal fell in love with David. Saul, being jealous of David's popularity, saw a way to get rid of this shepherd-boy rival. So he had some of his friends suggest to David that it might be a smart political move to become the king's son-in-law and clinch a spot in the royal household. That way he'd have more influence.

Well, when David replied that he didn't have the money to pay the price for such a high-class bride, Saul saw his chance. "Don't worry about money," Saul said. "Just bring me a hundred Philistine foreskins, and it's a done deal." But David did him one better—he brought back 200 foreskins.

A hand shoots up in the audience: "What's a foreskin?"

As my imagined scene faded, I realized that I might want to pick another story and avoid all the blushing and the stammering and all the talk about the circumcision of dead men. But then the other stories about David are not so safe either—stories about how he cut off Goliath's head with his own sword, or wept over the son who was sleeping with his wives.

Sure, there are safe parts. They are the ones for the picture books and the flannel board sets that we buy for Sunday school. There we don't see blood, spit or mutilated genitalia. Our modern sensibilities are constantly making excuses for the Bible, trying to clean it up and make it more presentable to a culture that buys bloodless chicken parts at Safeway and then goes home to spend an evening watching gore and sexual violence on cable TV. We don't like messes, and if we have to have them, we want them well contained.

Life is messy. And the Bible is messy. Yet we keep playing a game. My pastor always sneaks in an "and sisters" if he reads "brothers" in a New Testament epistle. He's trying to cover up language that makes women in our congregation unhappy. We ignore, apologize for, cut out and disregard much of scripture. We'd publish only the parts that we like, except that we'd be left with something so brief that even the *Reader's Digest* would be embarrassed to print it.

We need to see ourselves among the plotting, whoring, murdering, blaspheming people of God and pay attention to what God makes of the mess. And hope and pray that God will make something out of our mess.

Most of us can handle this material in our private readings, but it's harder in communal worship. And what about junior high classes?

As I was telling the story of David and Bathsheba, the first giggles came when I told of David sleeping with Bathsheba. More giggles came when I described David trying to get Uriah to sleep with her, pretending to be a good friend by offering a meal, some drinks and sending him home to his wife. I could see them shaking their heads. This guy is actually turning down sex! But the giggles stopped with the passage about the murder of Uriah and his men, and there was a hush when Nathan entered the scene and spat out his heart-stopping words: "You are the man!"

But I sent my listeners into peals of laughter when I told them Nathan's prophecy: "David, what you did in private to Uriah's wife will be done in public to your wives . . . by your own son."

And it came true. As part of his plan to take over his dad's throne while his dad was still alive, Absalom took David's wives up on top of the tallest building and had sex with them in front of everybody. You can imagine the uproar that elicited from my teenage audience.

But I pressed on with my conclusion, telling them of the scandal of God's grace.

We sin. God forgives, but there are consequences for our sins. With grace, these consequences will drive us back to God. And what's more, God goes beyond the consequences because he loves to create good things out of bad situations. God brings blessings. Even though Bathsheba's pregnancy ended in a child that soon died, she became pregnant again. And she gave birth to Solomon, a king who was known as the wisest man in the whole world. In fact, God nicknamed him Jedidiah,

which means "God loves him." Consequences? Yes. Blessing? Oh, yes.

After the retreat, a mom said to me, "My daughter said that the kids know all about David now." I hope they know something.

I also hope these young people will return to those stories, having been drawn to the concrete details of a drama about very real and very blessed people. I hope the Bible is more and more their own book, accessible to them even if—or because—it sometimes makes them blush and giggle.