July 25, Ordinary 17B (2 Samuel 11:1–15)

Scripture does not accept David's behavior for business as usual, and neither should we.

by Daniel Schultz in the July 14, 2021 issue

It is difficult to parse the original intent of the opening to the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him.” This could be a sarcastic jab at the ways of kings and armies. Wars are still commonly launched in spring for the sake of convenience.

But this passage is not about war, nor about David the hero or even David the leader. This is about David the schmuck. The story’s first line makes more sense as a subtle comparison of David with the men who serve him, an evaluation in which the king comes up decidedly short. He apparently can’t be bothered to do his duty, delegating the job to his top general and opting to loaf around at home. At loose ends one afternoon, he spots Bathsheba and decides he must have her.

So the woman is abducted from her home by palace guards, and when she is brought to the king, the Hebrew text says simply that David “took her,” a phrase often given the euphemistic translation “he lay with her.”

It’s rape. The imbalance of power makes this coercive, an assault, despite Nathan’s parable implying that David’s primary sin is property theft. It’s murder. When Bathsheba tells David of her pregnancy (her only dialogue in the story), he is desperate to conceal the evidence of his crime. But Uriah proves more faithful to his comrades than David is and refuses to break discipline by sleeping with his wife while his unit is still in the field. All of David’s wheedling and corruption fail, leading him to have Joab set Uriah up for death on the front. There is no literal blood on David’s hands, but he is responsible for Uriah’s death. A mob boss couldn’t have done it better.

Whether this story begins with sarcasm or incisive comparison, one thing it does not contain is cynical resignation. The passage never says this is just the way David is, the way kings are, the way men are. Rape, murder, and dereliction of duty may have been as commonplace in David's time as in our own, but commonplace is not the same as normal. What David does here is aberrant. To say otherwise lowers the standard for men of power. As the misconduct of too many powerful men has come to light in recent years, it is important to recognize that scripture does not accept David's behavior for business as usual, and neither should we.

More theologically, the Geneva Bible notes on this text declare that "except God continually uphold us with his mighty Spirit, the most perfect [people] fall headlong into all vice and abomination." This denies free will, saying that humans inevitably turn to evil sooner or later. It also pushes the perspective of the victims even farther to the margins. We don't know what Bathsheba or Uriah felt, their hopes and dreams and struggles. The story is only about David and his failings, which is a loss. There is simply no way to shrug our shoulders and say "that's the way people are" without further minimizing the suffering involved.

There is another reason not to accept this story as ordinary doings. When Uriah comes to meet with him, David inquires three times: How is Joab doing? How are the people doing? How is the war going? In the Hebrew, though, he asks about their *shalom*, their peace—bitter irony given that David's actions bring anything but. Jewish interpreter Akeidat Yitzchak says of this passage, "Community, after all, is what has been united by *shalom*, peace. The holiness of G'd depends on the community." David has betrayed both. But Yitzchak continues: "When the community sins, one must abandon it. When only an individual sins, the community must see to it that the individual repents, or they must place him [into quarantine]."

This point sprang to mind in the aftermath of the March shooting of eight spa workers and customers in the Atlanta area. The accused shooter's church quickly disavowed him. "We know this is the result of sin. It displays the total corruption of mankind," said his pastor. Less patient than Nathan in awaiting repentance, the church immediately placed the shooter into quarantine.

In contrast, the response of Korean churches in the area was to push toward civic engagement and racial justice. One way to abandon a society is to pack up and move. A better way is to refuse to participate in its injustice any longer—and to summon others to do likewise. Yes, perpetrators must be held accountable. But

when evil becomes routine, it’s time to abandon the systems that allow it to happen.

For all of David’s personal vice and abomination, his rule is the result of a polity that allows him unfettered power. For all the pathology and delusion displayed by powerful men today—or those able to borrow power by way of a gun—their crimes are the result of systems that allow them deference, complicity, second chances, and easy access to military-grade hardware. The results are predictable but not normal.

Maybe the lesson of David’s fall isn’t to assert that bad men are inevitable but to ask why we put up with them. David’s consequences are swift and severe. Though he doesn’t go to prison, as modern people might expect, he never fully recovers from this episode—and he never hurts someone this way again.