

October 21, 2018

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2 Samuel 11:1-5, 26-27; 12:1-9

“The silencing of Bathsheba: listening to voices in the gaps”

*Write into emotion. Not away from it.*

*Write into the wound. Not away from it.*

*Write into the joy. Not away from it.*

*Write into the scar. Not away from it.*

*Write into the height. Not away from it.*

*Write into the love. Not away from it.*

*Not away from it. Not away from it.*

*Write into it.*

- Nayyirah Waheed, “Untitled”

*Some of the most flagrant symptoms of social deterioration are acknowledged as serious problems only when they have assumed such epidemic proportions that they appear to defy solution.*

- Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*

Our lectionary text this morning appears at a time when news reports of sexual abuse and assault of women by men in power are ubiquitous. From reports of allegations against celebrities and movie stars to reports of ICE agents and detention officers abusing and assaulting migrant people to the recent testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford during the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. Many of us watch in astonishment at the callousness and voyeurism of the mainstream media and pundits, not to mention from those men who hold the highest positions of power in the country. While some watch in astonishment, others do not have the privilege of seeing these events at a distance, for they have become all too familiar, reflections of the trauma of ordinary life under patriarchy.

We are accustomed to thinking that history moves progressively forward, that the arc of history, to use Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous words, bends always toward justice. But if our present has revealed anything, it is that such triumphalism is, more often than not, shaped more by a mythology of optimism than by the wounds that remain in the flesh of those who suffer under violent realities. It is unsurprising to read Old Testament narratives wherein a violent patriarchy is on full display, but when we see it in our contemporary world, perhaps especially in the United States of America, the land of the free, we are astonished. But perhaps our astonishment is part of the problem, a reflection of our failure to listen, to attend

to the voices in the gaps, the lives of those who are so quickly silenced by the dominant order and drowned out by the dominant frames of mind.

Our narrative this morning begins with David, the celebrated king of Israel, of the people of God, who, we are told, sends out Joab and all Israel with him to ravage the Ammonites and besiege Rabbah. In spite of the fact that it was the spring, which was, according to custom, a time when kings would go out to battle, David decides to stay at home in Jerusalem. We are given no explanation as to why David would stay home from the battle, but it is clear that this is the explanatory context for why David is where he is and not somewhere else. “It happened, late one afternoon,” the text indicates. *It* happened. What precisely the “it” that happened only becomes clear as the reader continues. But the language of “*It* happened” suggests that what we are about to read, what we are about to encounter has the markings of a particularly egregious transgression in relation to which we are positioned as voyeurs. *It* happened when “David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king’s house.” *It* happened when David saw from the roof a woman bathing. The woman, the text indicates, “was very beautiful.” The text then explains that David sent someone to inquire about the woman and the report comes back to him that “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” Notice already that Bathsheba’s identity, her personhood, is cast only in relation to her father and her husband. The text notes that Bathsheba had been purifying herself after her period, her ritual bath a customary practice required by the law of ancient Israel. According to temple law, Bathsheba was unclean during the days of her period and before returning to temple worship she must partake of a ritual rite of cleansing.

And then *it* happened. David sends his messengers to get her, and she comes to him, and he lays with her, and then she returns to her home, later discovering and informing David that she had conceived. Over the centuries Bathsheba has been vilified as a seductress, as one who tempted David until he sent for her. Or, on the other hand, there have been attempts to make of this abusive act a romantic affair, with films created to support and reinforce the myth. Such interpretations are a sad, yet important, reminder that all too often Christianity has justified and reinforced, even encouraged and celebrated, the abuse and assault of women’s bodies.

Despite the rightward movement of our current political climate in the U.S., there is still a tendency to believe that the problem of the perdurance of sexual abuse and patriarchal power are somehow antithetical to the social and political foundations of American society. But I am afraid that this perspective, too, suffers from a quite powerful mythology about our social and political history and its legal systems and structures. Just as we would rather view racial slavery as an historical aberration that runs contrary to the values of liberal democracy, so too we would like to believe that patriarchy is an anti-liberal and anti-American sentiment, bound to run its course and peter out in due time, as the rights granted formerly only to white men of property have expanded to include the personhood and rights of women in its purview.

And yet, arguably the most important architect of the political and economic structures of the United States, the political philosopher John Locke, while not regarding women as mere property, operated out of a perspective that viewed the personhood of women only in relation to property-holding men. And, of course, this was only true for *white* women, whose citizenship and regard as human persons was more or less collapsed into the citizenship of their husbands and fathers, the patriarchs of U.S. civil society. White women were regarded not so much as persons with the same legal rights as white men but as proxies for the patriarch, the free man of property. Black and Indigenous men and women and children were, in sharp contrast, treated either as property before the law or effectively dead; in either case, these people were deemed nonpersons by the law and by the dominant order of U.S. patriarchal society.

While the legal rights have greatly expanded because of the struggle by women, African-Americans, Indigenous peoples, and immigrants over the course of the centuries, the foundational legal, economic, and political systems in the U.S. have more or less remained in place. And it seems to me that Dr. Ford's recent testimony during the Kavanaugh hearings demonstrate for us, with such force and power, the utter bankruptcy of a society well-constructed to *serve and to keep white men of property* in power. Here we witness a situation in which a highly successful white woman with impeccable credentials offers a truly remarkable, clearly articulated testimony of the abuses against her, and in response she is shamed and effectively told that her voice and her experience does not matter. If this does not demonstrate the *limits* of the very structures of this society, I am not sure what will. It is simply astounding. Whose interest does this country serve?

We would like to think that this is merely an aberration. But I am afraid it is not. I recently read a story of a trans Latina activist, named Jennicet Gutierrez, who had been invited to a reception celebrating LGBT Pride month, along with several other LGBT activists. The reception happened just two days before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-gender marriage in one state must be recognized everywhere, an affirmation of marriage equality. President Barack Obama spoke at the reception. Undocumented and trans, Gutierrez is one of the founders of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement, a queer immigrants' rights organization. Gutierrez disrupted the reception with a call for the president to release queer people from immigrant detention centers. "I'm tired of the violence we're facing," she said. The audience immediately began to boo and shush her, attempting to silence her voice, as chants of the president's name began to rise. In response, the president looked at Gutierrez and said, "You're not going to get a response from me by interrupting." He went on to say, "You shouldn't be doing this. Can we escort this person out? Can we have this person removed, please?" And she was promptly removed.<sup>1</sup> The limits of the politics of inclusion. Whose interest does this country serve?

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<sup>1</sup> Story told in Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 245-46.

Imani Perry reflects on this moment. She writes, “Gutierrez breached the codes of civility. But she did so to expose how a moment of incorporation would nevertheless leave so many in the gaps and so vulnerable. She did so to describe how she, undocumented and trans, would remain in the vestibule even as some others who were formally excluded could become property holders and patriarchs and achieve full personhood. She did so to make a passionate utterance on behalf of those who are incarcerated, abused, and reviled both here and there. . . . She creatively broke the order. Her voice ripped into the room, changed the tapestry. . . . She begged the question: With whom do we cast our lots in that moment? With the one who is cast out or with the one who excludes?”

In 1893, in her book *A Voice from the South*, the great African-American scholar, Anna Julia Cooper, wrote: “Not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won--not the white woman’s nor the black woman’s, not the red woman’s but the cause of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.” In other words, the condition of black and Indigenous women, including queer and trans women, is like a barometer for the condition of *all women*.<sup>2</sup>

As 4,000 migrants from Central America, principally from Honduras, join the Caravan northward seeking freedom from violence in their land, many of them women and children, indigenous, mestizo, trans and queer, this administration again is threatening to cut off aid to Central American governments, shutdown the US Mexico border, creating lies that these people are drug-smuggling criminals, infiltrated by ISIS operatives. The question for us is, again: with whom do we cast our lot? With the ones who are cast out or with the one who excludes?

Returning to our text for today, we read of Bathsheba. But the text passes over her so quickly. She becomes simply a moment in king David’s story. But do we see and hear her? Her voice, her body, her personhood is drowned out by the scriptural text. Bathsheba is rendered by law and by custom and by scriptural writ as a *nonperson*. And yet she *was* a person; she *is* a person. She is in our midst. Dr. Ford is a *person*; Jennicet Gutierrez is a *person*. The 4,000 migrants fleeing violence in Honduras are *persons*. *People*, flesh and blood, live in zone(s) of non-personhood. Even while they may be treated as effectively ‘dead’ before the law of nations, their lives and their creations have always persisted. They trouble, they haunt the dominant order. As Imani Perry puts it, “Their life and love is defiant.”

In the midst of social media hot takes of these events and others, what might mean for us as a community to become a people who refuse to allow Bathsheba to be rendered silent by the dominant order? What might it mean for us to be transformed into a people who have

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<sup>2</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002) 139.

developed a different way of seeing and hearing, a politics of listening to the voices in the gaps, of listening and being attentive to the people who are caricatured or drowned out by the dominant order? What might it mean for us to interpret scripture not from the perspective of kings but from the perspective of Bathsheba, from the perspective of those voices that are routinely excluded from the narratives that justify the power and legitimacy of kings? What might it mean for us, in our daily lives, to develop the tools necessary to *listen* to the voices of women, the voices of those in the gaps, white, black, and Indigenous women, whether migrant or queer or trans. What might it mean for you? What might it mean for me to learn to *see* and *hear* and *feel* differently such that we no longer view people from the perspective of the violence of patriarchy, where only men of property are regarded as persons, but begin the work of listening to the trauma of abused people in such a way that we too become listeners who “feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within,” while at the same time acknowledging the differences and particularities of our experiences.<sup>3</sup> This is a task, a work to which each of us is called. It is not the task of assuming the place of the victim, but of sharing in the difficult relational work of listening and caring and healing and thereby moving towards new forms of relations that are not shaped and determined and controlled by the dominant order of things. Bathsheba speaks, but do we hear her? Her voice remains a disruptive, prophetic presence, calling us to see and hear and feel the pain of others, provoking us to see and hear and feel the pain of those we encounter daily. May the voice of Bathsheba speak to us and may we hear in it the voice of the living Word of God.

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<sup>3</sup> See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Unbearable Witness: Toward a Politics of Listening,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11:1 (Spring 1999).