

July 28, Ordinary 17B (2 Samuel 11:1–15)

## **It's almost as if power and prestige somehow facilitate abusive patterns and protect perpetrators!**

by [Joanna Harader](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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As a child, I loved *The Cosby Show*, and Bill Cosby's pudding commercials, and his comedy bit about eating cake for breakfast. (Just the other day I ate a cupcake for breakfast based on his reasoning that cake includes milk and eggs.) When sexual assault accusations against him began to emerge publicly, I didn't know how to reconcile the lovable TV dad with the man who drugged and raped women.

As an adult, I had a passing appreciation for the comedy of Louis C. K., partly because of how he addressed issues of sexism. But it turns out that even as his stand-up routines acknowledged the ways women are often victimized, he was, himself, victimizing women.

And of course it is not just comedians who fall from grace. It has become public knowledge that Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder and L'Arche founder Jean Vanier both committed spiritual and sexual abuse against multiple victims.

Honestly, the list of entertainers and church leaders who have turned out to be abusers is depressingly long. It's almost as if power and prestige somehow facilitate abusive patterns and protect perpetrators!

Take King David, for example. His literal position on the roof of what is surely the tallest house in town allows him to watch Bathsheba bathe in what she surely thinks is the privacy of her own home. And his political and social position mean that when he commands it, she doesn't dare refuse to go to the palace or to have sex with him.

It's hard to know what to do with David, this sexual predator and murderer who is also an important part of our faith tradition. How do we deal with people who abuse

their power in such egregious ways?

The short answer is that we try to remove as much of their power as possible. In our contemporary context we take people to court, we remove them from their positions, maybe we remove their books from reading lists. But what about in the context of biblical interpretation? What does it mean to remove power from King David as readers of the biblical text?

Maybe it means, in part, talking about this week's reading not as the story of David and Bathsheba but as the story of Bathsheba and Uriah. Maybe it means shifting our focus from David's abuse to Bathsheba's resilience and Uriah's virtue.

The biblical writer, David, and the messengers all objectify Bathsheba in this story. Yet despite these efforts to silence her, Bathsheba manages to have a voice. After her forced sexual encounter with the king, she misses her period and sends word to David: "I am pregnant."

In situations where I feel pitted against people or institutions with a great deal of power, it is tempting to simply slouch away and hope nobody notices me. Calling attention to myself seems like it would be exhausting and possibly dangerous. But Bathsheba doesn't slink away and hide, she says something to the king that is guaranteed to get his attention. She reclaims her voice and asserts control over her violated body. She claims what power she can and refuses to be silenced or cast aside. She truly is a hero in this story.

Uriah is also to be commended. So often the moral failures of a leader are used as an excuse for those following that leader to slack off themselves, to skim a little from the top, to not do quite the job they are expected to do. We know that David is slacking off because it is "the time when kings go out to battle" and David is lying around on his rooftop couch. When Uriah is brought home, he could easily justify going to sleep in his bed with his wife—his leader is relaxing at home, so why shouldn't he? But Uriah maintains his virtue; he lives by his values even though his leader, the king, is not doing the same.

In this story, both Bathsheba and Uriah have what David lacks: integrity.

It is easy to feel disappointed, even disoriented, when we find out that our would-be heroes aren't so heroic after all. In our disorientation, perhaps we can reorient around those whose quiet courage and integrity challenge those who use their

power in self-serving ways. Whenever there is a King David abusing people and power, we can usually also find Bathshebas—those who insist on speaking the truth about the abuse, regardless of the consequences. We can usually also find Uriahs, behaving with integrity even in the context of a corrupt system.

In our moments of disappointment and disorientation, perhaps we can reimagine the public narratives in ways that honor God and provide hope for God's people.