

## Get in the Boat

Over the past few weeks, our readings have offered insight into how power can corrupt the human soul. King David, once God's beautiful shepherd boy, has succumbed to the temptations of sovereignty. It's spring, the season "when kings go out to battle." David sends his army out to ravage the neighboring kingdoms but doesn't lead the charge. Instead, he stays behind in the comfort and safety of his Jerusalem palace. Taking a turn on his rooftop, David spots the beautiful Bathsheba, a married woman, and is instantly smitten. His passion for her produces a surprise pregnancy, which David first attempts to pass off as the child of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, who has been away fighting in David's war. When that deception fails, David quietly orders his general to have Uriah transferred to the front lines, where he's likely to be killed in the battle. David gets his wish, and Uriah dies in the siege of Rabbas. We'll hear next week how the Lord responds to the king's secret sins.

The lectionary pairs this sorry anecdote with John's version of Jesus feeding the five thousand. We've heard the story so often that it's easy to forget the magnitude of this miracle. With five little loaves of bread and a couple of fish, Jesus is able to feed five thousand people a satisfying meal, something the poorest of them might never before have experienced in their entire lives. There are even twelve big baskets of leftovers for them to take home. So, how do the people show their gratitude? They try to take Jesus by force so they can crown him king.

Their efforts fail, of course. Jesus escapes into the mountains by himself, leaving the disciples to make their way to Capernaum by boat. Night falls, and a storm blows up. The disciples are three or four miles from shore when they see Jesus strolling toward them across the water. Terror grips them, as it so often does, but Jesus cheerfully tells them not to be afraid. At their behest, Jesus gets into the boat with them, and they reach their destination.

Before getting too far into these readings, we need to remind ourselves not to come down too hard on David. There's nothing noble in his behavior. He was flat out wrong to seduce Uriah's wife, and we can't assume that Bathsheba returned David's passion. He was the king; if he commanded, she had little choice but to obey. Nor should we make the same assumption as the various artists who have painted Bathsheba as a temptress, flaunting her beauty where she was certain to catch the king's royal eye. Nothing in the text suggests that she either sought out or welcomed David's advances. It seems more likely, at least to me, that David had been king long enough to develop an inflated sense of his own entitlement. The leader who once charged Goliath to protect his people now sends his armies out to risk death in his name while he stays safely ensconced in luxury. In fairness, David was pushing – if not past – the age of forty at this point. Maybe he was no longer able to easily swing a sword or topple giants. By staying out of the fray, perhaps he spared his troops the burden of keeping him safe. But I can't help seeing certain parallels between his self-protection and his self-indulgence with Bathsheba. David had become a king who took whatever he wanted simply because he could. In that, he was like nearly every other king in history. The founder of our own Anglican tradition, Henry VIII, was no different. Henry didn't create the Church of England to reform Roman Catholic corruption. He just wanted a divorce that the Pope wouldn't give him. Henry turned his church and his country upside down so he could marry a new, younger wife and father an heir, preferably a son. That's the kind of thing kings do. It's ugly, and it's very, very human. In David or Henry's position, none of us can be certain we wouldn't do the same.

That even a God-kissed soul like David could fall so far says something about kings, but Jesus's audience didn't get it. They were ready to make Jesus their king even if they had to crown him by force. They might not even have realized how he produced the food. All they knew

was that they were no longer hungry and, like Scarlett O'Hara, they wanted to never be hungry again. They thought taking Jesus captive would keep the food flowing, and they didn't care if he wanted to be king or not so long as they got what they wanted. They misunderstood both the man and his mission, and they put their own needs ahead of his wishes. That, too, is very human.

There's something exhilarating about the thought of Jesus slipping away for some quiet time when evening was beginning to fall. I sometimes wonder whether the constant presence of a demanding mob, or even of his well-intended but sometimes slow-witted disciples, ever made Jesus feel a little claustrophobic. Much as he loves us, it's not as though any of us can really keep up with him. When he went away to commune with his Father in private, maybe he also enjoyed the freedom to let his own divinity shine forth. John tells us that Jesus "knew what he was going to do" when he asked the disciples how they were going to feed the crowd. We can imagine Jesus eagerly giving his miraculous powers free rein. Maybe multiplying all those loaves and fishes loosened him up enough that a nighttime stroll across the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a violent storm was nothing more than a pleasant after-dinner constitutional for him.

We don't know what Jesus was thinking as he made his way across the turbulent waters to the disciples' boat. We know they were terrified, though John doesn't say whether they were more afraid of Jesus or the storm. It was probably some of both; watching their teacher walk on water must have been unnerving. The interesting bit is what Jesus does next. After telling them not to be afraid, Jesus could have just kept on walking. He could have calmed the sea so the disciples would have no trouble catching up with him in Capernaum. Instead, because his frightened disciples needed him to join them, Jesus got into the boat.

That simple gesture exemplifies the difference between the King of Kings and human royalty. People who aspire to rule typically set themselves above and apart from those they

govern. Jesus, who stands far above us in every respect, graciously stoops to join us in the storm-tossed boat of the human condition. When he sees a need – the hunger of a crowd, for instance – Jesus doesn't lean back on his throne and tell his subordinates to fix it. He leans forward, multiplying whatever's available until everyone has plenty. I believe he calls us to do the same.

The Gospels tell us what to look for in our leaders. The good ones don't seek power so they can lord it over others and grab the best of everything. They don't aggrandize themselves, delegate the dirty work, or keep a regal distance. They meet people in the middle of the mess, inspiring them to share what's on hand so that everyone can enjoy a life of freedom and dignity. They lead by example, offering hope and encouraging us to join them in service. When we do, the Holy Spirit shows us that the storms of life can be navigated, problems can be solved and there really is enough for everyone. If you'd like to see that happen, come visit our food pantry some Tuesday morning, where a handful of volunteers distribute donated food to scores of our neighbors. Our guests don't always get their first pick, but there's always plenty to go around and lots left over at the end of each day. It's the loaves and fishes, albeit on a smaller scale, and little miracles happen every week.

Episcopalians aren't noted for our poverty. Few of us are billionaires, but most of us have enough resources to live quite comfortably. Here, in a state capital so close to D.C., we have plenty of access to power and important people. So, if you want to meet a modern King David in the form of a celebrity actor or journalist, a member of Congress or even a Presidential candidate and you're willing to pay for a ticket, you can enjoy a rarified evening high above the mess and muddle of everyday human existence. There's nothing wrong with those black-tie events – some of them raise lots of money for worthy causes. But if you want to meet Jesus? Better skip the banquet and get in the boat. Amen.