

## Bathsheba Speaks

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II Samuel 11

“I’m pregnant”.

I wonder how many people have had their world shattered by those two words? I’m pregnant. How many?

Maybe you have had your world changed forever, hearing or knowing that. I know I’m not the first or the last to speak those words, knowing that they hang in the air long after they are spoken, like a heavy mist that blurs the vision and fills the lungs with every breath so that breathing itself is laboured and slow.

If you have been there, then you know. Think now of how it felt.

I know there are those of you for whom those words came as a gift, and a joy... and with you I praise our God, El Shaddai.

I also know that some of you have longed more than anything in the world to hear those words. They did not come, and you have felt an emptiness I will never know. With you I ache, and offer to you my own sense of our God, El Shaddai, who like a child fills your body and is born inside you again and again.

But there are others of us, aren’t there... who heard those words and felt them as though they were a sharp blow in the pit of the stomach - words that changed the world for us, forever.

I am one of those. If you are too, you are not alone. Where was God, El Shaddai, for us?

I would love to sit and talk with you to discover your answer. My own came slowly, and with pain - like pregnancy and birth itself. Listen as I tell you my story and share with you my answer, which is still birthing within me.

There’s more than one bitter irony to all of this - but the one that strikes me now is this: my parents got their wish. The wish that above all else their grandchildren not be half-breeds. It’s an ugly word, isn’t it - but that’s what they said - “Half-breed”.

You see, I married a foreigner. Uriah was a Hittite - from people who had been our enemies. We married quite against my family’s wishes, and my parents disowned me, publicly mourning their grandchildren, not yet born, because they would be of mixed blood.

In a sick sort of way it's funny. Uriah and I never did have children, and the ones I had were fully Hebrew. Oh yes - they were fully Hebrew indeed.

Racial prejudice is such an ugly thing that what happened seems like one of its logical conclusions.

As I said, when I married Uriah, my parents disowned me. I was very young, and life was difficult. Others in the community shunned us, even though Uriah followed all of our customs (better than many of us) and fought in the king's army. He was gone for long periods of time and I was lonely quite a lot. But Uriah was kind, and we got along well when he was home - and when he wasn't I relied on a small group of women friends whose husbands were also at war. Together we talked of life, and faith, and laughed and loved each other. They became my family, and I remember those times still with joy.

All of that changed in just one day. Looking back, even now with all I know... with all I have learned through my sisters and my Sister El Shaddai - even now I still have trouble with guilt. I know it was not my fault. I know that with my head, and I know it with my heart - most of the time. But the ways of the world cut deep, and what the world teaches is soaked into our beings from the time we are born. It's hard to fight it. But fight - fight it my sisters and brothers.

Soaked into your beings too are things stronger than the ways of the world. The sun: bathing you in warmth, the coolness of refreshing and life giving water; the song of the birds splashing the silence; the pools of beauty in music and art and dreaming; the oasis of friendship, and the deep, deep well of strength and courage at the very core of your being that is you and gift beyond you. Yes, my friends - soak yourselves in these things. Bathe in them, and let them wash away the rest.

I've had to work long and hard to recover what it means to bathe - because that's how my life changed that day. I had just finished bathing (following the custom of our people, there is a ritual purification after menstruation) when a knock came on my door, it was a messenger from the king - the king! The king wanted to see me immediately. I couldn't imagine why - I assumed it was bad news about Uriah, but why would the king tell me in person? Usually special messengers delivered news like that.

I'd been with two of my friends when they came to tell them their husbands had been killed in battle... so why the king, in person? And what was he doing in Jerusalem anyway when he should be our fighting with his army?

All of this went through my mind as the messenger took me to the palace. I had never been in the palace before, but I barely noticed the place as we walked through the long corridors and up a winding staircase - by the time we got there I was out of breath and braced for the worst. I had convinced myself I was going to hear of death.

I can see as though it were yesterday the way his face looked when the huge doors opened and I was ushered into the presence of the king. If you are a woman you will know what I mean. The

look on a man's face - the glassiness of the eyes that makes you feel naked, and what he has on his mind is no secret.

At first I was confused - but as the truth dawned on me I looked around quickly - the servants had all left and discreetly locked the doors after them. We were alone. Neither of us had yet uttered a word.

I'm sure you will understand if I don't go into detail about what happened next.

You call it rape. Did I fight - did I scream? He was the King. Who would believe me?

Who would care? What the king wants, the king gets. I was afraid I would die. And then

I was afraid I wouldn't die - and then he told me I could go home now.

I went. The cleansing ritual bath after my period was nothing compared to the bath I took when I got there. I made the water as hot as I could stand, and scrubbed 'til i was raw - and it was nowhere near enough. it felt like I would never be clean again.

By the way - it was only later - much later - that I learned that he had seen me bathing from his roof. That's when the guilt really set in... was it my fault? I didn't know he could see into our bathroom from his roof- (and after I lived in the palace I checked it out - you had to really stretch your neck to do so) I didn't know. And even if I had, I thought he was out of town, fighting with his men, the way the king was supposed to. I just didn't know. After I found out that he told people I enticed him by bathing, it took me a lone time to bathe freely again.

I'm told that in your world, rapists do the same sort of thing: blaming the victim - the way they were dressed, and so on. Not long ago, a newspaper in your country reported about a man who raped a 3 year old girl. He told the judge she was acting seductively.

She was three years old.

There are all sorts of variations on that, including "well, she went out with me, so what did she expect?" and "I saw here bathing and couldn't help myself." That's what I meant earlier by the ways and reasoning of the world that soaks into us - sometimes we are tempted to believe it.

But it is not true. Victims are not to blame. That kind of power game is very evil. Victims are not to blame. You have the voices now to say so - and I ask you to do it - loudly, and every time you have a chance - because there are victims everywhere who need to hear it - if it came from a church, the message would be liberating indeed - both for the hearers and the proclaimers. Victims are not to blame.

The chilling part of the aftermath - the days that followed - is how ordinary things were. Life went on, on the outside, as usual. Inside me - everything was changed. At first I didn't know just how literally true that was.

When the first month went by I dismissed it, hoping against hope it was the trauma. By the time the second month came and went, I knew the truth. I began to feel sick literally - especially in the mornings.

What was I going to do? For weeks I had tried to put the king out of my mind – hoping there would never again be contact – of any kind between us – every time a knock came at my door I jumped - terrified I was being “summoned” again - I wanted nothing to do with him.

Still - when my pregnancy became known in the city, people would know my husband wasn't the father - he'd been at war too long - and the penalty for me would be death. I would die.

My only chance to live would be if David intervened on my behalf... but on the other hand, he could just as easily have me killed to avoid a scandal. I weighed it out, and decided the only way I had even a slight chance was to tell the king and hope he would save my life.

I sent a message - 2 words. “I'm pregnant”.

I don't know what I expected - but I didn't hear a thing from him. Not one word. I waited - my condition was going to be obvious and so I did what I could – I told my women friends what had happened. They understood. Similar things had happened to a few of them – not with the king, but with soldiers, or relatives, or workers in the field. It felt so good to say how I felt and to know they understood.., to hear them say the things I didn't know how to put into words - the shame, the nightmares - they held me and we cried together - laughed together too, and through their loving care I began to feel whole again. It was they who held me too, when news came about Uriah's death, and they who told me what people were saying about how he died. Do you know I never suspected that? Every woman married to a soldier knows that someday that news may come.

But I was still shocked by it and in my grief totally unaware of any of the whisperings, or suspicion about Uriah's death, until they gently told me what people were saying. And then the day came when the king sent for me again - this time to be his wife.

To marry the man who had killed my husband. What would you have done?

I felt - well really I felt nothing. I was dead inside. As though a merciful anesthetic had washed over me, inside and out. As though I had bathed in a protective liquid that covered and shielded me from the last indignity.

My choices were non-existent. I went. Life in the palace was very different, but I saw my old friends when I could, and also became friends with the king's other wives. Abigail was very nice to me, and Michal, while it took her while to warm up to me, became like an older sister. None of us was under any illusion about our relationship to the king - and we all knew his heart belonged...well, not to us.

I have to say that, almost as hard as the death of my baby (I secretly called him Uriah) was knowing that people believed he died to punish David for what he had done. I can't believe that, and I won't.

In the women's quarters we talked about that..., and my old friends felt the same. We are daughters of Eve - mother of all the living. We are daughters too of Sarah, who knew that God did not require the sacrifice of her child on Mount Moriah.

Together we spoke of our god - El Shaddai, God of the mountains – God with breasts – who bore us from her own womb, who led us through the waters of life and who nurtures and cares for her people.

God does not kill babies to punish their parents.

God does not kill babies period.

Together we spoke of the God of our experience and the experience of our foremothers: who is in the midst of us, there in the human arms reaching out to us when we are in pain and in shame. There at the heart of our loneliness and abandonment. There as a bath: enveloping, soothing, healing, invigorating, cleansing, empowering. This is the God who is life and who gives life.

This is the God who enabled me to bathe freely again, secure in myself and my worth, sure of my place in the universe and who offers all of this to you.

Come, my sisters and brothers – bathe in the waters that give life.