

Do You See Them?

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All NBA XPLOR Residents are encouraged to preach as part of their service commitment with their host congregations. This blog post was delivered as a sermon on Sunday, November 19 at Community Christian Church in Richardson, Texas.

Trigger warning: rape, sexual assault

The National Sexual Assault Hotline's telephone number is 1-800-656-4673. Trained support specialists are available 24/7, whether you're looking for support, information, advice, or a referral. Phone calls are free and confidential.

It was difficult for me to focus on a topic for this sermon. I knew that it should be centered on American Thanksgiving, and I was pretty sure that I wanted to give thanks for women, but that doesn't really narrow anything down. Women do so much. They build and sustain churches, schools, families, and communities. They also endure so very much.

As I was struggling to put together words to say to you all, I found inspiration, and despair, in the social media posts I see every day as part of my internship. As I was scrolling through Twitter, I came across so many news articles about women coming forward with experiences of rape and sexual assault, often involving men in politics, or the entertainment industry. The thing connecting all of these men, whether they are straight, gay, Democrat, or Republican, is their power. Their gender, and their positions in society, have all given them immense power, and they chose to wield it over women's' bodies. I knew at that moment, as so many emotions boiled up from my stomach, to my throat, to my eyes, that I had to respond to these stories. There are two reasons for this:

1. It is my story. My first encounter with sexual assault was at the age of four, at the hands of a neighbour's teenage son, who was babysitting me at the time. The next was at a similar age, at the beach, by a lifeguard. After that, it was by a male doctor when I was 13, during routine breathing test. My own mother was in the room, but his back was to her, shielding his actions from view. The following year I was molested by a man in a crowd at a concert. All of these men had power over me too, because I was a girl. Now you could say, "Well that's because you were in Saudi Arabia. Men over there are known to act that way." I would say that all of these men were of different faiths, ages, races, and educational backgrounds. And I would ask you to look at your own country, because...
2. ...it isn't only my story. It's our story. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, an American is sexually assaulted every 98 seconds. And every 8 minutes, that victim is a child. 1 out of 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. About 3% of American men have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. 1 out of 4 transgender students have reported sexual abuse. (All of these statistics don't accurately reflect reality due to underreporting.) And the majority of sexual assaults take place in or around the home. That means most assailants are family members or friends. That also means that I'm not the only one in this room that has been assaulted.

But even if I am, I'm certainly not the only one in history who's been forced into non-consensual sex. Just take a look at the Bible, in Genesis, Judges, and here in 2 Samuel. In fact, 2 Samuel has more than one victim to choose from: Bathsheba and Tamar. While I will speak on the latter, let's start with the former: Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

What do we know about her? Not much, other than what I just said. She is Uriah's spouse. And her name, we know her name. Which may not be much in the 21st century, but back then, that was quite a lot, especially if you were a woman in the Bible. Less than ten percent of names in the Hebrew Bible belong to women. We also know that she is a descendant of Eliam. Like so many women, she is defined by the relationships she has to men. (Later we learn that she becomes the mother of Solomon, future king of Israel.) And like so many women, she is characterized by her looks. In the previous scripture, she is described by the author as "very beautiful." We don't hear any of her thoughts or feelings. But maybe that's on purpose, so that the reader is forced to focus on the sinful actions of King David in 2 Samuel 11. From the roof, he can see that she is bathing. He wants her. And so, because he is the king, he "takes" her, knowing that she is married. He himself is married to at least six women at this point. There is debate in the church over whether or not this act is consensual. Make no mistake: it was not. Consent by fear is no consent at all. Besides, what was a woman to do back then? Refuse the king, especially one chosen by God?

It's at this point that we hear the only line spoken by Bathsheba in this story: "I am pregnant." David suddenly decides to spring into action. (Remember, he had stayed behind in Jerusalem while the Israelite army destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. He was lounging on his bed when he decided to take a stroll on the roof of his palace.) David summons Uriah from the military campaign under the guise of seeing how the soldiers and the war was going. He then sends him home, hoping that he will have sex with his wife and assume that the baby Bathsheba is carrying, is his. David sends him off twice actually, but Uriah keeps on sleeping among his master's servants instead. In his words, "...my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I... make love to my wife?" So David has Joab put Uriah "out front where the fighting is fiercest." Uriah dies. When she learns of her husband's death, Bathsheba mourns him. When that's all over, David has her brought to his house, and without the cultural norm of consulting her father, he marries her. She bears him a son.

"But the thing David had done displeased the Lord." Notice that the author says "thing," and not things. But what "thing" was it that made the Lord so unhappy? The prophet Nathan tells David "the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ...the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own." David had committed adultery. He had coveted his neighbour's wife. The Lord had anointed him king over Israel and delivered him from the hand of Saul. He gave his master's house to him, as well as all of Israel and Judah. (He was also given his master's wives, but I've been told that that's OK because that's what it was like back then.) Anyways, David had despised the word of the Lord by doing what was evil in his eyes. Samuel warns us of this earlier on in the Bible, of the corrupted actions committed by kings. In 1 Samuel 8 he says, "This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place *them* for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots. He will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers." Yes, David was chosen by God, but that does not mean that he was allowed to abuse that power. Human motives, mixed in with divine purposes, are often carried out in the Bible. David did what he did, because he could. Because he was powerful and there was no one to stop him.

This year alone has seen the downfall of our some of our most beloved figures in entertainment and politics. Louis C.K. admitted to asking five women to watch or listen to him masturbate. Allegations against George Takei and Kevin Spacey demonstrate that a predator is a predator, no matter his sexual orientation or race. In May, Anthony Weiner plead guilty to transferring obscene material to a minor. Alabama judge and politician Roy

Moore has been accused of sexual misconduct with five teenagers. But allegations have been following directors, actors, comedians, and politicians for decades. Since 1978, film director Roman Polanski has been a fugitive from the U.S. criminal justice system for statutory rape of a 13-year-old girl. And of course, even though Bill Clinton's extramarital relationship with Monica Lewinsky was completely consensual, many have criticized it as sexual misconduct on Clinton's part due to the vast power imbalance between a president and an intern.

For the older men on this list, this tired excuse is often trotted out: "...but that's what it was like back then." What does that say about what we value in this society? That we are quicker to protect the reputation of men, than to believe the pain of women? Another tactic is to victim blame, to ask what the victim was doing, saying, or wearing, as if any of that justifies sexual assault. This is based on the assumption that men just cannot help themselves, that they are powerless to overcome their own lust. What then, does that say about our belief in men's self-control? Not very much. But it is telling that, in the words of Michelle Obama, we "raise our daughters, but we love our sons." We teach our girls to be modest, so that they don't invite unwanted attention, we police what they wear, even in elementary school, because we value boys' education over girls'. We ingrain this kind of thinking into our children at such a young age, that they take these lessons and apply it to their lives only a few years later when they enter high school. The Steubenville High School rape case saw a female student, incapacitated by alcohol, repeatedly raped by her classmates, several of whom documented their exploits on social media. While the trial saw a guilty verdict, we know that many perpetrators get off easily. Brock Turner only received six months in jail for felony sexual assault. He was a student athlete at the time of his assault, and so many student and professional athletes are protected because they make money for their schools and sports teams.

OK. Let's everyone take a deep breath. This has been pretty hard for me to slog through. And I'm sure that it's been pretty hard for you to hear. If anyone needs time alone or time outside, please don't hesitate to do so.

I'm not going to say that God has a divine plan and that it'll all work out in the end. If I did then, shoot, I've committed the sin of pride for assuming that I know so much. What I can say is that there is grace in the scripture. While King David is forgiven for his sinful act, he is punished. Bathsheba, the victim, is not. David's sin, that of which he did in secret, is brought out into the open.

Now other victims of sexual assault in the Bible aren't so lucky. Later on, in 2 Samuel, Tamar gets raped by her half-brother Amnon, and she is left alone in her brother Absalom's

house, “a desolate woman.” While Absalom does kill Amnon, God does not directly address the injustice committed against her. But we can read about her pain: she puts ashes on her head and tears the ornate robe she was wearing. She puts her hands on her head and weeps. Her story is recorded. It is not swept under the rug.

In the New Testament, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The sin then, is in the eye of the beholder. In Luke 7, Jesus is eating at the house of Simon the Pharisee and a sinful woman anoints him. (It is assumed that her sins are sexual in nature.) Simon is aghast, but Jesus asks him, “Do you see this woman?” He doesn’t care about her past “transgressions,” only that she loved him greatly. She was hospitable in the way that Simon was not - she wiped his feet and kissed them. Her faith saved her. Do we see the women in our lives who have been raped or sexually assaulted for the human beings that they are? Or do we just call them names like slut and whore and move on, because it’s easier than confronting the fact that predators live among us? Jesus shows us the behaviour that we are compelled to model in our own lives.

When I was in middle school, I loved to listen to Motown music. I told my mother that I wish I was alive during the 1960s. She said that I wouldn’t like it back then, there were a lot of rules I’d have to follow as a girl. I didn’t understand it at that age, but I do now. I thank God, literally, that I live in the time and place that I do. While women have been vocal about their stories since time immemorial, it seems that they are only now being taken more seriously. Predators are being taken to court and they are removed from their positions of power. Victims feel more comfortable speaking up.

Back home, after a cop in Toronto told students at a law school that women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized, women organized a “slut walk,” where participants take to the streets to put an end to rape culture, or a culture wherein it’s acceptable to blame the victim. Where rape jokes are funny, but in actual fact signal to predators that their behavior is acceptable. Now, annual “slut walks” take place all over the world.

Most recently women have been exposing the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment by using the two-word hashtag #MeToo on social media. While I encourage participation in any campaign that raises awareness, I am troubled by the pressure on victims to prove how widespread misogynistic behaviour is. Shouldn’t women be believed from the get go? Why must we publicly bare our burdens for people to believe us? I hope that by educating the general public, similar campaigns will not be needed in the future.

Finally, after women accused Moore of pursuing inappropriate relationships with them as children, other women have been sharing photos of themselves at 14 on Twitter to prove that 14-year-olds are incapable of consent. (Moore initiated a sexual relationship with one of his victims when she was only 14 and he was 32.) One woman tweeted, "I was actually 15 in this pic .. but pregnant at 14. it took me decades to realize [that] most of the bad things that happened to me were NOT MY FAULT. I AM SO HAPPY that we might have put a stop to MEN ABUSING GIRLS & Women!!"

How can we continue this momentum born of what we've learned in the news recently? By educating the boys and girls and children of all genders who will be leaders one day. By no longer saying, "boys will be boys," but, "boys will be held accountable for their actions." By seeing women as deserving of human rights, regardless of their relationship to you as your sister, wife, mother, or daughter. By no longer engaging in "slut shaming," or stigmatizing women for engaging in promiscuous or sexually provocative behaviour. By creating safe spaces for people of all genders to come forward with their stories. Our church can be that space. We can be that space by calling out "locker room talk," by reading the stories of these women in the Old Testament, instead of ignoring them. I myself only read them last year and I cried when I did. I had no idea that my faith was so littered with women's pain and hurt at the hands of men foundational to my faith. Yes, that was difficult to read, but it was necessary. It is necessary for all of us to read these stories. To bring them out and expose them to the light, so that we can do that for ourselves and the members of our communities. We must ask ourselves,

Do we see them?

Because the them, is us.

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NBA XPLOR is a 10-month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a "heart for care" as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. **Learn more and apply at nbacares.org/xplor.**