

“You Are the One”

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2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

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The people wanted a king. The prophet Samuel had warned them what it would mean to have a king, but the people still demanded a king to lead them. They thought a king was what they needed to keep up with other nations – in order to be able to maintain their status and defend themselves against threats. Samuel warned them that being ruled by a king would be a dramatic shift for the people of the covenant. He warned that the king's power could lead to grasping for more and more and a loss of a sense of community. But the people still demanded a king.

God's word came to Samuel, allowing the people to choose their own path and have their king. The hope of the people was invested in having a leader who would seek God's guidance. But we know that's not exactly how it all turned out.

Israel was in a period of change and transition, moving from a loose tribal confederation toward an emerging monarchy. Saul was the first anointed king, and then we have David. The role of the king had not been completely defined by Saul. In fact, Saul and David's relationship had not been on the best of terms. You might recall that, on several occasions, Saul tried to kill David.

David was figuring out what it meant to be king. The scripture we heard tells us that he chose not to go out into the battlefield with the troops, which was uncommon for a king during this period of time.

Prophets like Samuel always seem to appear in the lives of leaders in the biblical narrative. The prophets show up at opportune times, or maybe you would consider it an inopportune time if you were on the receiving end of the particular prophecy being delivered.

Our story tonight is no different. Nathan, the prophet, shows up to deliver a message to David. The event that precipitates Nathan's confrontation with David is a disturbing story, one of the many disturbing stories we find in the Bible. It's sometimes easy to gloss over the difficult texts or to avoid them altogether.

I think we sometimes forget that, even though the stories may seem outdated or are part of an historical context that has little relevance to our own, we still can learn and be challenged and confronted with our own weakness, with our own struggle between being faithful and looking out for ourselves. Our own stories reside in this kind of tension, as much as they do in the places where justice is sought and peace prevails.

Just to recap – it is spring, “the time of year when kings go out to battle.” But David stays behind in Jerusalem. While the troops are out fighting on his behalf, David notices a woman bathing on a rooftop. He sends someone to inquire about her, and he is informed that the woman is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite.

Uriah was one of the soldiers in David's army. In spite of the fact that David knew Bathsheba was married to one of his soldiers, David sends for her, has sex with her, and she becomes pregnant. The text says, “David took Bathsheba.” The verb “take” used in this context can be translated to mean rape. However the verb is interpreted, David clearly abuses his power, and therefore abuses Bathsheba.

Even after he repents, what David has done cannot be undone. David is caught and ends up in a complicated web of lies and deceit, calling Uriah back from the battlefield, hoping that he will have sex with Bathsheba, thus covering David's transgression and freeing David from his sin. But in Uriah's faithfulness to David and to his role as a soldier, he refuses to return to his own home, even after David gets him drunk.

Uriah sleeps outside the king's palace, despite repeated efforts by David to coerce him into seeing his wife, Bathsheba. David's efforts fail to convince Uriah to see her, thus leaving David with no choice but to send Uriah back to the battle, with his own death warrant in hand, instructing officers to make sure Uriah gets killed on the frontlines. The officers in the army carry out David's command to have Uriah killed.

David is in the clear, or so he thinks. He had effectively removed Uriah from the scene. The only people who knew about what he had done were Joab and the nameless messenger, who returns to David with the news of Uriah's death.

When David received the news of Uriah's death, he sent the messenger back to Joab with a statement, effectively washing his hands of the situation. Death is an inevitable outcome of war. Don't let this matter trouble you any longer. Keep on fighting.

David was free to marry Bathsheba, whose voice and feelings and wishes remain absent. All that the text offers is a brief sentence telling us that she observed the appropriate period of mourning after Uriah's death before becoming David's wife.

There are many things that can be explored in this story. For one thing, we could talk about the many harmful and inaccurate interpretations that have attempted to sanitize and soften it— from casting Bathsheba as the seducer, to rationalizing that David was saving Bathsheba from a difficult relationship, to spinning it as a love story.

I want to focus our attention on Nathan's parable. It seemed that David's actions had escaped notice, but then the pesky prophet Nathan appeared and had a little story to share with David. Nathan's story drew David in, moved him to great anger, and then hit him square in the face with his own guilt from having abused Bathsheba and having had Uriah killed to cover his transgression.

It's easy for us to think today: How could David have missed his own story in the parable Nathan told him? How could he be so dense? It seems to happen so easily. David is completely focused on the outrageous way that the rich man took advantage of the poor man and his family, who had no power to resist the exploitation. Who would not be appalled to hear such a story? Who would not be enraged at the thought of taking advantage of someone in the way that the rich man took advantage of the poor man by taking the family's pet, a beloved lamb, and serving it to his guests for dinner — all the while owning hundreds of sheep of his own?

The real question in Nathan's parable is: How have you committed this very act? Would we see our own story in Nathan's parable? When we do find ourselves in the story, what do we do about it?

One place that seems obvious is in our own political, social and economic culture, where power and profit and progress, and the pursuit of all of these at any cost, blind us to the importance of community and the common good. David's story permeates our modern daily news on a regular basis. We don't have to look very far to see or hear about the scandalous behavior of politicians or other leaders breaking personal promises and making decisions that appease the highest bidder.

We see the threats to the education system as our leaders shamelessly pledge their allegiance to a political agenda over and above the wellbeing of our children. We watch as our leaders sell out to big oil and energy companies, turning a blind eye to the devastation taking place in the environment — some ignoring the scientific data and claiming that global warming doesn't actually exist — as we watch the images of wildfires sweeping the western part of our country, as we hear about ecosystems undergoing change at an alarming rate, and as we, here, are wearing sweaters in mid-August.

We can all name the places where we see the story. I've watched in the hospital as representatives from billing services approach families, way too soon after they have received word of the dire prognosis of their family member, asking how they plan to pay their bill. I'm sure that we could spend a good amount of time tonight naming other places where we see these dynamics at play in the world around us — where we see profit and power outweighing common sense and dignity.

But let's be honest, it can be easy to look outward and name the places where we witness this kind of disconnection and betrayal. We watch our political leaders waver and witness the consequences of systemic injustice and we call for accountability and responsibility. But we are still left to wrestle with Nathan's parable. Nathan's story confronts David about his personal story, taking advantage of Bathsheba while Uriah was away in battle, and it forced David to recognize his complicity and sin.

"Where do you see *your* story in the story? You are the man." Nathan challenged David to look within himself, which proved to be much harder than condemning the rich man who took the poor man's lamb.

We all have the capacity to be in relationship in ways that promote goodness and life, and we strive to do this. But, like David, we hold contradictions within ourselves. Sometimes we make life-giving choices that contribute to the wellbeing of others. But, we don't always choose the life-giving path. Nathan's parable calls us to look within ourselves today. You are the man. You are the woman. I am the one who has sinned against my neighbor. I participate in systems that oppress others. We all do.

Our actions have far-reaching consequences. We may not always see the direct results of our actions that exploit other people or the environment, but in subtle ways we perpetuate systems of oppression by our very participation within the larger system. We may not see the specific impact magnified in the same ways that David did, but the results of our misuse of power and exploitation exist. The choices we make impact the people around us, whether that is our desired or anticipated intention or not.

I talked with a student this week who recounted her experience working in a fast food restaurant. She talked about the toxic environment that was encouraged by management. Everything always

needed to look and appear perfect. All the food products were supposed to be displayed and served in exactly the same way. Managers were harsh when order was not kept.

She began to notice over time that co-workers became quick to point out each other's mistakes, snapping at one another, making sure that everyone around knew that it was someone else, not them, who had messed up. As long as blame could be placed on someone else, you were being "successful." Her story made me think about the places where I have fallen into this trap, where I have been quick to point out mistakes made by someone else. The story is about us all.

The messages we receive daily try to convince us that we need to consume more and more, that consumption trickles down and eventually benefits everyone, that power is a good thing to seek, that we are in constant competition with each other. It's an alluring and seductive message. But there is something missing. And we find what is missing when we hear Nathan's story, a story that names the cost of consumption and competition, without consideration of the impact outside of ourselves.

Who among us has not heard about and been appalled by stories about laborers around the world, working horrendous hours, in hazardous conditions, not even for a living wage – only to casually purchase the products of their labor – because our world seems to "require" it. And there we are, right in the middle of the story.

Who among us has not acted in a way that has harmed a personal relationship with a friend or family member? There we are, participants in the story.

So what do we do? We look out for and find people like Nathan who are willing to hold us accountable. We don't separate ourselves from community. We create and participate in community that calls us to recognize our interconnectedness.

We tell and re-tell the stories that remind us of the ripple effects of our actions. We strive to be honest about our weaknesses and challenges and where we have fallen short. And we celebrate with each other when we work toward that which breathes life into the world, where we catch glimpses together of the beloved community.

The author Tim O'Brien says, "Good stories deal with our moral struggles, our uncertainties, our dreams, our blunders, our contradictions, our endless quest for understanding. Good stories do not resolve the mysteries of the human spirit but rather describe and expand up on those mysteries."

That seems like an accurate description of Nathan's parable. Nathan draws us more deeply into the mystery. David is presented as a real person, not just an idealized leader. He does some good things, just like us. David is also filled with flaws and shortcomings, makes mistakes and bad decisions, just like us.

David's story is extreme – ending in murder – but we cannot allow ourselves to fall into the trap of condemning him while failing to see ourselves in Nathan's parable. When our choices and actions negatively impact the wellbeing of others, we have sinned.

David's story is our story. David's power is our power. David's sin is our sin. And when we forget, that pesky prophet Nathan might come knocking on our door:

There were two men in the same city – one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep, herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him.

One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal to set before his guest.

David exploded in anger. "As surely as God lives," he said to Nathan, "The man who did this deserves to die. He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess. Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Amen.